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## THE TWO COOL SPORTS; or, Gertie of the Gulch.

A STORY OF THE HIDDEN CITY.

BY WM. R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "SOFT HAND SHARP," "HANDS UP," "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK," ETC., ETC.



"I SAY, STRANGER," CALLED OUT COOL-SPORT DEVLIN; "HAVE YOU THE UPPER HAND OF THOSE KITTENS, SURE?"



# The Two Cool Sports; OR, GERTIE of the GULCH.

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UP," "PISTOL PARDS," ETC., ETC.

## CHAPTER I.

### A PLOT AND THE PLOTTERS.

THERE were half a dozen mining-camps with-in supporting distance, and of more or less dignity and importance, in the district through which they were scattered.

They had their grades of men, as more populous places further east; but their worse were the very worst.

It was a new country from Lode City to Cactus Fork, and the towns were of mushroom growth, though thriving.

From Cactus Fork men pushed out to the south and southeast; but the country beyond was a region none too well known, though held in evil repute. Many who went out on the dimly-lined trails, or the almost trackless desert beyond Cactus Fork, never came back.

Still, the rush continued, and the sight of a strange face was hardly a matter for comment. A score of such might appear at Lode City without exciting attention.

When Philip Ashley and his niece dropped down there they caused little remark, though the presence of a handsome young lady was more likely than anything else to do so.

They registered—verbally—at the Miner's Joy, and after a little Ashley left his charge, as she seemed to be, and went wandering over the town, stopping at several saloons on his journey. When he returned it was after sunset and the girl, whose name was Edna Wheeler, was anxiously awaiting him.

"Well," she said, as he came to her side, "have you heard any thing here, or is this place like all the rest?"

"In a year a young man can lose his identity and wander beyond recall," he answered, and it seemed as though he might be speaking evasively.

"You have heard at last; speak quickly," cried Edna, springing to her feet, "I knew the quest would not be vain. He has only forgotten us, and we have found the trail that will take us to him. Very well. We need not be hurt at him. He is all that I have in the world, and when we lost all trace of him for a year, even as we have lost trace of our father, what wonder that I should come with you to search for him? You have been so good. What other girl has a guardian and uncle that would be bothered with a woman, on such a journey, or would have come so far off of his way to humor her whim of searching Lode City? Well, what is it?"

Half a dozen times Edna seemed about to stop; but as often, as her guardian kept silence, she went on. Perhaps she was afraid to hear the knowledge she pleaded for.

Ashley was not altogether a handsome man; now his face looked darkly sinister, though Edna did not notice it. It only seemed to her that she could feel within her the knowledge that he had something to tell her.

"Yes, I have heard of him. Lode City boasts a paper, and as these editors are walking compendiums of knowledge I called at the office.

"I asked my questions without much hope; but I got more information than I bargained for. Arthur Wheeler's name is not unknown hereabouts, I can assure you, and within the last six months he has been in this district."

"Ah! then he lives yet, beyond a doubt."

"He lives indeed—or did at last accounts—but it was not a healthy life. How can I tell you more?"

"Go on. Why should you hesitate? If there is a worst let me know it."

She grew suddenly anxious, for his manner was impressive.

"Well, then; if it be true, what I have heard, he is more than lost to you. You have been wasting your tears and regrets upon one whom you should only strive to forget."

The man spoke with slow, deliberate emphasis, and one might have thought the girl would be crushed by his words.

She was not, but on the instant arose in glowing wrath.

"It is false! I knew that you never liked him—brother of mine though he was. Now I know that you hate him. But I will not give him up, I will find him if he be living."

"Better for you that you should not. If he is such as I hear he is—and there can be little doubt about his identity—as your guardian I should compel you to give him up utterly."

"And what, pray, may he be?"

"Let this paper answer for me. You will see now why he has forgotten you and the interests at home that he should be caring for. I had my suspicions; but as long as they were not certainties I could humor you. Now I can speak with

firmness. You must give him up, brother though he was."

He handed her the paper as he ceased speaking and turned away.

She did not attempt to answer or stay him, but her lips closed firmly; and a man who knew her so well as did Philip Ashley could tell that she was making up her mind.

She glanced at the paper, however.

It was written in the true, high pressure vein of western journalism, and was headed, "The Latest Frolic at Poker Flat."

It went on to state that a young man, supposed to be from the East, and rejoicing in the name of Arthur Wheeler, had made his appearance at the Flat, some weeks previous; and that almost coincident with his coming there had begun a series of very remarkable crimes, which might have gone on indefinitely had not the assassin—for such he was—made the mistake of marking a well-known visitor, Judge Brandt, for one of his victims.

The judge had taken warning by almost a miracle, overcome his assailant after a short, though terrible struggle, and turned him over, considerably the worse for wear, to the tender mercies of a Vigilante court.

They made the mistake of overestimating the damage done, and when a verdict of guilty, and a sentence of death had been rendered and pronounced, the prisoner, who had been supposed to be in no condition for flight, was discovered to be missing.

How he was spirited away was a mystery to every one; but the temporary elusion could hardly make much difference in the end. Poker Flat was on its metal, a reward of two thousand dollars had been offered, and the inhabitants had turned out en masse to hunt the fugitive down, who was supposed to have left in the direction of Cactus Fork. The article added that unless he joined, as was possible, the vanishing procession that sought the mythical Eden City—as was possible—he would certainly be found.

She crushed the paper in her fingers, and strode once or twice across the room in grand excitement.

"And Philip Ashley thinks I will give him up now. Never! Nor shall he drag me back. I know that he can hold to his purposes with bulldog tenacity; but so can I. Fortunately I am provided with money—he hardly knew what he was about when he left me the sinews of war. I will leave him here and go on my way alone. Let him try to drag me back if he dares. If this Arthur Wheeler be brother of mine there is a mystery in it all that must be unraveled—and what so deft at that work as a woman's fingers? And if, as I suspect, there is foul play, then I may avenge. Were it possible to do so I should suspect Philip Ashley first of all."

The girl's words might have sounded like wild ravings, yet she was in deadly earnest—so much so that that night when the stage for Walnut Bar went through she came quietly out and took her seat within. She hardly imagined that Philip Ashley was watching her departure, or that a man with a fierce black eye stood beside him interested every whit as much.

"I knew it would work," whispered Ashley. "She can be driven to anything. She has left me of her own accord. You understand?"

"I do."

"That I would give a thousand dollars to be certain that I never should see her again."

"Be easy. She will not stop this side of Cactus Fork. I'll reach it before her, though, and there I am a chief."

## CHAPTER II.

### POCKET JIMMY OF CACTUS FORK.

THE stage from Walnut Bar carried half a dozen passengers bound for Cactus Fork, a mining-camp some twenty miles below Poker Flat, the three places being at the three angles of a triangle that had very nearly equal sides.

Five of the passengers were men; but the sixth was a young woman, plainly dressed in a rough-and-ready traveling suit, and who appeared to journey alone and with little baggage. She was quiet, self-possessed and reserved; and, though she answered several remarks that were made to her by her fellow passengers, she spoke so coldly and guardedly that no one seemed inclined to attempt further intimacy. The fact that, with one exception, these men were bone and sinew, who were seeking Cactus Fork with an eye solely to hard work and its chances of profitable return, probably accounted for their lack of gallantry.

The remaining passenger of the male sex was one that might have puzzled a wiser head than that of Edna Wheeler, though unfortunately—or fortunately, perhaps—she did not notice the riddle that lay behind the shining, guileless, school-boy face—for James Hurley, or "Pocket Jimmy," as he was called by those who knew him best, appeared to the casual observer but a youth, and a very innocent youth at that.

To look at his face one would not have pronounced him, at first glance, over eighteen or twenty, with a probable guess away below that. His voice bore out that comfortable illusion completely. It was always soft and rollicking or respectful as the case demanded. To him the

young lady turned finally, and, after some hesitation, asked a few questions in a guarded way in regard to the Fork, of which place she had heard rather unpleasant accounts.

Pocket Jimmy never told the truth to any one if it was at all safe to do otherwise, and she could not have picked out a more unreliable person; yet it was altogether a satisfactory bit of conversation.

"Safe? Bless your soul it couldn't be safer. Why, I can just crawl all 'round that burg the darkest kind of a night, and there won't a party offer to raise a hand ag'in' me. And it ain't every mining camp a boy can go frolicking about after the dark sets in. Why, up at Poker Flat they take men in—real, live men—and just swaller 'em whole. That's a bad place, a mighty bad place, miss, and if you're looking for a place to put up your tent, you just fight shy of the Flat."

"I do not care to go there, I am sure. I have heard of the town already. Some terrible murders there, weren't there? You should know something about them."

"Gosh! You bet. Wasn't I there when they were going to string up the young sharp from the East? Didn't I see him when he took the first express for the next station without waiting to get the checks for his trunks? I could have put them right down on him, too; but it wasn't my chip, seeing I belong at the Fork, so I just smiled to see him light out."

"But was he guilty? Surely you must know something about that?"

"I didn't ask him, but they seemed to have things down on him very fine. If he didn't do it Judge Brandt must have lied awful—and the judge is just solid with all the boys there. They'd take his word for a million, and glad to get it."

"I hear that there has been no trace found of him since; I suppose you could not give a guess as to where he went to?"

Pocket Jimmy smiled again, and shut one eye.

The action said that he might hazard a very shrewd guess if he wanted to.

"That's the conundrum, miss, they were all asking; and Judge Brandt, when he spit it out, tacked right on to the tail-end of his asking that he would give two thousand dollars to any one that would answer it. But I ain't saying anything. Let 'em find him if they want him. I ain't that kind."

"You are a brave young man; but I assure you that I do not ask the question to repeat the answer, or to do him harm. Indeed, I am sure he is innocent, and I would help him if I could. You need not be afraid to speak."

"I ain't so sure about that. You may be a woman detective, on his trail, hot. I tell you, I wouldn't like to give him away."

"A detective! What an idea! Do I look like such a creature? No, I am here alone, and looking for friends that it is doubtful if I find. I ask as a matter of curiosity; but really it is nothing to me."

The conversation was held in a low tone. Edna tried her best to keep all anxiety out of her voice, and believed that she had succeeded; but Pocket Jimmy was no man's fool, or woman's either, and he had already decided on his course.

He leaned nearer, spoke in a still lower and more confidential tone.

"If things are as they was I kin put you right in front of that chap, this very night. If they ain't, and they ain't took him in, then I'll bet a dollar I know where he is ag'in. He's skipped for Eden City."

"Eden City? Where is that? I have heard the names of a great many camps, but never that name."

"It's where they go to when they can't stay anywhere else. Leastwise, it's where they start for; but no one knows that they get there, for nobody that takes that trail ever comes back. If it's true what they say about it, it must be a rustlin' old burg, with streets paved with dornicks of gold, a s'loon at every door, an' dance-houses on each corner. When a man strikes that camp he just sits down on a pile of solid chunks, and is so rich he don't want to come away. I tell you, if it wasn't for pa, I'd have struck that trail long ago, and took the chances."

"And you think he has gone in search of this camp—this Eden City, as you call it?"

"Always provided he's skipped the Fork."

The young woman considered a moment. She had read and heard enough about the mines and miners to understand what seemed to be the facts in the case.

There is in every camp a story or two, more or less local, floating from mouth to mouth, of some miraculous spot, the road to which is unfortunately either a secret or unknown. To have started for such a fabulous spot meant a disappearance, for a time or permanently, that would be utter, complete, and almost without remedy.

Still, it might be possible to gain some information in regard, not so much to Eden City, as the probable road any one would take who was starting out to find it.

This youth seemed to wise in his own conceit.



and yet so innocent withal, that Edna, in her own mind, resolved to push the acquaintance further, even if she had to take him somewhat into her confidence. She returned to the charge with a fire of questions that elicited a corresponding volley of information.

"I'll tell you, miss. I don't want to risk too much, I'm only a boy, and I don't know everything. I might start you on the trail for Eden City and if anything went wrong I'd blame myself. You'll stop at Shorter's—that's the regular station, and the correct thing to do—but if you'll let me call and show you round to-night I can bring you to the only man in town that can give you points that you can bet on. They'll be solid, and he's just an old side partner of the young man you're talking for."

Pocket Jimmy understood the case exactly, and talked in a matter-of-fact way that gave no alarm. Edna trusted him—as a good many more experienced persons had done before her—and although she did not promise, she did not repulse. Pending her mental decision the stage came rolling down the grade that led right into Cactus Fork, whose streets were now visible in the distance.

When the vehicle stepped in front of Shorter's the juvenile Jimmy was kindness itself, for under his guardian care Miss Wheeler was quickly made at home.

Having seen her located, and satisfied with the promise of the best accommodations that the house could afford, he disappeared from the hotel and reappeared at a haunt where he seemed more than welcome. "The Rooster's Ranch," had an inside circle, the members of which stuck together like wax, and Pocket Jimmy was one of them.

"Glad ter see yer, Jimmy," growled the proprietor, Buck Kerrigan. "They've been a waitin' on yer, ter know how matters stand now, afore they move. Ther captain ain't bin gone ten minutes, an' he said he'd be back an' see yer, if yer come, afore sundown."

"Curses on it, I want to see him now. If I don't it may block just the neatest thing out of jail."

"Eh! I thort ther' war somethin' afoot when I seen yer so bloody perlit to ther bit o' calico as come over in the hearse. What is she, Jimmy, sharp er flat, an' what's ther game like you've got yer eye on?"

"Oh, don't be so bloody inquisitive. The less you know about it, the better for you. She's a flat, and the dog-gonedest flat that ever walked on sole-leather. I've got her right on a string, and, I tell you, she's got a neat little thousand to divide around among two or three boys that have the sand to run a little risk. I want to see the captain to get his idea just how the thing had better be done."

"She's an innercent lookin' leetle lamb to kerry a pie like that into Cactus Fork. Why, it's a ten-tenpin Providence, an' ther sooner she hez help ter tote it, ther sooner we'll know just whar it goes to. Count me in; an' ef ther's no more nominated ter help yer won't hear a whimper from yours truly! I tell yer, trade's been dull, an' it's time we begun slingin' out fur ther duckats ef we don't want ter starve when ther grass goes."

"Don't be too infernal anxious. This is a case that maybe there'll have to be careful handling on. I've got you counted in for sure; but like as not the captain will have to put in his say-so. At any rate, I've got about half an engagement to come here with her to-night."

"What! Hyar?"

"That's the size of it."

"Then you'll have to see him, an' I'll send right out an' bring him in. He's mighty pertickler what goes on hyar."

"That's solid sense. While yer sendin', I'll give yer a point or two on why I took the contract."

The messenger was dispatched, and in his absence the man spoke in low, earnest tones.

Pocket Jimmy had a good deal of information; some of it relating to Edna Wheeler, but more to other matters in which he had fully as deep an interest.

In the midst of it all a man entered hastily.

He was squarely and solidly built, without having a cumbersome form. His face, which had been bronzed by exposure to wind and sun, had doubtless, at one time, been remarkably fair.

His eyes were black, but one scarcely noticed their exact color, since hair and beard were a light brown.

His hands, which were rather under the medium size, showed no signs of hard work, though the fingers, that were long and tapering, possessed a gripe of steel. A very handsome man was Captain Howard Bascomb; but if he was an honest man he had some strange friends.

His greeting was cordial, with a touch of authority; and Pocket Jimmy was a different man at once. In a few, terse words he told his story, and sat waiting in evident anxiety for some sign of approval or disapproval.

"And you are certain that the girl has a thousand dollars in her purse?"

"Sure. I all but counted it myself."

"Then there is more behind it. She is a little gold mine, that can be handled without the hard work and heavy risk of the fools over

yonder. I'll bet another thousand she's run away from somewhere, and there'll be money for the ones that find her. We mustn't be mixed up in this thing, though. Burro Bill and a couple of his pards are in from the Flat. I'll put it in his hands. He's just the man to run the preliminaries. Wants to go South anyhow; and don't care what kind of a row is raised after he is gone. He'll run it through, and I tell you there'll be no chicken-hearted nonsense about him."

"Maybe there'll be something else. I wouldn't trust him too far. He'll prime up for the occasion; and when Burro Bill gets benzine on board he's a nasty man to manage. Besides, a thousand dollars is big money for him to handle when he wants to skip. For half that he'd cut her throat, and go on to the next town."

"Hardly. He knows a thing or two, and he won't try that. He knows he'd never get there. No. Burro Bill will stand to orders—and if he don't there will be a corpse extra. I'll arrange matters with him, and the less you all know about it the better, only see that half of you stand in to help him if he needs help, for I tell you, it's a bold game he will play, with plenty of chance for an outsider to chip in."

"Oh, we'll be 'round," answered Hurley, with a shade of impatience. He was not altogether satisfied with the prospect.

"Of course you will, and you'll have to play a fine game of it too. If you don't get half your teeth out you'll do well, for Burro Bill's love-taps are sometimes hard enough to mash a bear. You will have to bring her here, and when Bill comes in you must ruffle up a little; but don't crow too loud."

"Don't worry about that. It's a horse to a hen sort of a game, and nobody can crow if I take water with a man like Burro Bill. But you better give him a hint not to crowd the mourners too hard, or there may be another funeral."

"That is all right, I'll give him a caution; but see that you keep your eyes open."

With this the council of these worthies of the "Rooster's Ranch" broke up. Without a doubt Edna Wheeler was menaced by terrible danger—and a second consultation, though altering the programme somewhat, did not lessen her peril.

### CHAPTER III.

#### BETRAYED.

SHORTER'S Hotel was a lively place about the time the stage came in; and as every one was busy with his own affairs no one had time to trouble himself about those of any one else. Edna Wheeler got just what she asked for, and nothing else; though she could hardly complain of want of attention. As she stood alone and looked out at the busy throng she felt pleased with the place, in spite of her loneliness; and rather hopeful, since it seemed to her that she had already struck upon a clew to the whereabouts of Arthur. The chance that led her to speak with Hurley was looked upon as a happy one, since, without him, she recognized how much at sea she would have been in commencing her search. Youth and innocence sometimes make terrible mistakes.

If she had interviewed her landlord in regard to Pocket Jimmy no doubt she would have gained wisdom; but it was not so to be.

After supper she started to go out for a brief walk. Cactus Fork was not exactly a city, and there was little danger of losing her way.

As she stepped out into the street she encountered several admiring glances, that made her turn her head away and wish for a veil. In that way she missed the one face on which there was something like a grin of recognition.

She would hardly have cared to accept the party, however, as a friend, since he was not only a complete stranger to her, but a full-blooded Indian to boot.

Yet he seemed to be satisfied in his own mind that he knew her. He gave a long look after her as she glided away, and when she had gained some distance he turned and followed, though in a careless, non-committal way.

After a time she turned and sauntered back, and that brought her face to face finally with the red-man, who, halting, raised his hand with a gesture that doubtless meant that she should halt.

Edna was no coward, and her eyes were keen enough to see that the aborigine had not been drinking. She obeyed without fear, and stood ready to hear.

"Leetle white squaw want friend to tie to ketch hold Red Bear. Him all hunky dunky pard, an' never go back. Pocket Jimmy bad man on wheels, you hear me? Don't you forgit it."

"Excuse me, my friend, but I think you have made a mistake. I don't understand you, and I don't know you, nor the Jimmy you refer to. Allow me to pass."

The Indian, who was dressed much after the fashion of the ordinary miner, doffed his hat and made a low bow.

"Leetle girl don't know Red Bear. He know leetle girl all right. Got him eye open, an' when time come chip in; but better she don't go way from house. Let her stay there—she hear

something. See! Dangerous for her walk 'round Cactus, an' she learn nothin'."

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Edna, somewhat surprised.

"Never mind. You stay at Shorter's. Red Bear bring you news bimebye soon. Don't speak with Pocket Jimmy ag'in. Him bad medicine, heep. So 'long."

It was an unmistakable warning, as well as a promise, but when Edna anxiously bent forward for an explanation the Indian had silently glided away, and though she called to him, in a guarded way, he never looked back.

Unfortunately she did not identify Pocket Jimmy with James Hurley; and so it came that she went back, perplexed and wondering.

She did ask a few questions in regard to the Indian, but no one about the hotel knew anything of the man, who had made his appearance at the Fork for the first time that day, and had not reached Shorter's in his wanderings through the town.

While she was pondering over the warning Hurley made his appearance.

"It's all right, miss," he said, confidently. "I've found the party that can set you straight and though he don't care about letting me into what he knows you won't have any trouble in striking him for all he's worth."

"A moment, then. It is later than I had expected to be out, and I had better leave word where I am going."

"Good glory, no! Do you want to get somebody hung? Keep this all to yourself. Why, I'm actually giving somebody's life away. No, you slip out, as quietly as you can, and I'll meet you, in fifteen minutes, at the next corner. In ten minutes you can be posted and back."

Edna was not pleased with the prospect, but saw no way of escape unless she was willing to abandon her search altogether, and so agreed. Hurley went away as quietly as he had come, and in about a quarter of an hour she joined him.

Then, by a somewhat devious route, he led her toward the Rooster's Ranch, which lay at the other end of town.

Past more than one saloon they went, in their journey, and more than once Edna shuddered at the sounds that issued through the open doors. The darkness had come down and it was Saturday night. As usual, pandemonium had broken loose at the Fork.

"Certainly you don't expect me to go in there?"

Edna slackened her speed as they approached the Ranch, and pointed at the building from whence proceeded sounds that were by no means pleasant to her uneducated ear.

"Oh, they're harmless as lambs, though they are rough enough when you scratch against the grain. But that's only the saloon part. We don't go near that. I'll give Kerrigan a wink, and he'll come over and see you. It's a raving big house, and we go in on the other side."

It was late for Edna to think of retreating now, when she was just on the verge of what might be a revelation. She gave a last look around her, and then followed her guide, who entered the house without knocking.

A dim light was burning in the room, and a man was seated by a table, who rose and gazed at her with what seemed to be an inquiring look.

Then the light suddenly went out, she heard the man spring toward her, and at the same time Hurley clapped one hand over her mouth while his other arm seized her around the waist.

"Don't you scream or stir," he growled in her ear, in a tone that she would never have recognized. "If you do we'll have to kill you; but we mean you no harm."

The lithe form quivered for a moment in his grasp, but Edna uttered no cry, and as she seemed to sink away in his arms, Pocket Jimmy would almost have sworn that she was going to faint.

"Quick, Bill, bear a hand now, and cast her into the cellar before she comes to. I knew this was the best plan, and if we work it right no one need be any the wiser."

"Curses on it, if she tumbled over so easy it warn't worth while ter douse ther glim. Hold on a minute. Try an' shoot ther bolt whilst I strike a match."

Still holding the sinking form of the girl, Hurley leaned backward and shot the bolt, while Burro Bill relighted the lamp which he had so hastily extinguished.

Then Pocket Jimmy had the surprise of the season.

Without a word Edna seemed galvanized into motion.

Out from his arms she sprang, the instant the little flare of light illuminated the room. The fact was that as she had entered she had seen a doorway upon the opposite side, and suspected that it led toward or to the saloon. If she could gain that door, and it proved unlocked, she had no doubt that she would be able to make her escape. Surely these men would not follow her into the crowd; or, if they did, there would be some one brave enough to take her part.

Burro Bill lost a fraction of a minute in his



surprise, and that gave to Edna all the chance she wanted.

She shot by him like an arrow, and flung herself against the door, which yielded to her touch. Before her was a narrow, dark passage.

Along this she rushed, running against another door that also yielded. Then she sprung into the saloon proper, just as she heard the cry of Burro Bill at her back.

"Save me!" she cried, and took refuge behind the shoulder of the nearest man.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### THE RED SPORT.

"RED SPORT hold um edge. Burro Bill want um crowd er game, *chip in*. Eh? I'm er hunky dunky sport from High Pine. Wahoo!"

A finer specimen of manhood, so far as the muscular type went, Cactus Fork had never seen, though the first flush of youth had long since passed. It was a little strange, too, for he was a pure-blooded Indian; and red-men who have lived long among the whites are apt to be the worse for the contamination. He was, however, straight as an arrow, and full of a pantherish grace that seemed to show him to be a hard man to handle.

No doubt so thought Burro Bill, slogger, known desperado, and suspected road agent. He paused, and looked cautiously from the Red Sport to the shrinking form that, so suddenly entering the long room of the saloon, had taken refuge behind his shoulder.

Burro Bill, following closely, had felt himself hurried violently back just as he was reaching to grasp the fugitive, and Edna Wheeler, gasping and stunned, had not the voice to ask again for the protection that she so urgently needed.

The lull lasted but for a moment, then Captain Bascomb's man spoke up, with a voice rising with his wrath:

"Stand back, Injun, ther gal ar' mine, an' so ary one o' ther boys at Walnut Bar kin tell yer. An' it ain't so much ther gal I want ez ther buckskin o' ther pure oro, ez she stole when she lit out. It ain't like er white man ter take er shove from er red nigger; but bein' ez yer done it fur er wooman I'll let that go ef yer waltz straight outen camp. an' don't let us see yer red nug hyer ag'in. But yer hed better be goin' rapid like, afore I freeze right down on yer in er solid chunk."

He was gathering courage and nerve, and in the men that came crowding around him, with no very friendly glances at the Red Sport, he saw backers and allies, who would take his part when the trouble once began.

"Bah! Burro Bill heap much blow. All lie and wind. Red Bear friend to white gal all away an' back ag'in. So, white man—white dog—go 'way."

At that the rough could contain himself no longer, but sprung at the throat of Red Bear like a tiger.

He did not even take time to draw a weapon. Perhaps he was aware that such an attempt would be dangerous.

Edna gave a cry that sounded like one of despair. It was one against a dozen. She looked at those around her, and gaining no hope, she turned suddenly, and rushing past protector and foe, dashed out of the open door.

Burro Bill knew his man—though neither he nor any one else at Cactus Fork had seen him before that day: Red Bear made no effort to avoid the shock. He crouched a little, with his hands held rather closely to his sides, but ready to ward off a blow if offered.

The white man did not offer to strike. His hands were thrown out quickly, and the Red Sport's arms answered the movement. In an instant the two forms were locked in a mutual embrace, Burro Bill uttering a hoarse growl as he felt the Indian within his grasp.

Then there was a staggering to and fro over the hard-packed ground floor of the saloon, a chorus of encouraging yells from the spectators, followed by a wild shout.

Up into the air went a dark form—to fall again upon one of the tables with a thundering crash—while the Red Sport sprung back against the wall of the room, jerked out from his belt two revolvers, and uttered a ringing war-whoop.

"Wahoo!" he shouted. "I'm Red Bear from High Pine, ther Injun Sport, an' ugly on ther shoot! Who chips in on my lay-out? Say?"

Fortunate was it for Burro Bill that he struck fairly upon the table, since, though it was splintered and crushed into fragments, it broke the force of his fall, and fractured no bones.

Up leaped the man and stared around him in a dazed sort of way.

He could not comprehend, just yet, what had happened to him; and to see half a dozen of his friends drawing their pistols, while the air was thick with their howls of rage, seemed, for the moment, to be only the sequence of some terrible nightmare.

It was more real than a nightmare; more deadly than a dream.

In Cactus Fork there was no harder den than the "Rooster's Ranch," nor worse men than those who were ready to train behind Burro Bill. A tribe that slaughtered for the sake of slaying, there was no man who knew the ins and outs of Cactus Fork who would have cared,

or perhaps dared, to face them, or expected to beard them and go away alive.

"Hold on thar, Red; I've got yer lined!" shouted one. "Stand back, boys, an' see me make cold meat on him. Say yer prayers, Injun. I hev yer foul."

The speaker stood apart from the rest, and in a line with the Red Sport, along the wall. His revolver was cocked and leveled. All he had to do was to pull the trigger, and the fun would be over.

Yet he did not crook his finger.

At that moment a man bounded through the doorway by which Edna had disappeared.

"Hold on thar!" shouted this new-comer. "Ther fust man ez moves a trigger gits one of these pins in his shirt bosom. Stand back thar! Ther Injun's ther only white man in ther crowd, an' I'm a-backin' his game. You hear me, say?"

This man had nerve enough for a dozen—not one man in a dozen would have dared to face him. His hands were raised high, and in either one he held by the point of the blade a huge bowie, while in a belt around his waist could be seen half a dozen, gleaming, naked, more.

Nothing is there that brings courage to the touchstone sooner than to be confronted by a knife in the hands of a stern, strong man, whose name is already at the head of a record.

And no stranger was this backer of the Indian, though it would have been hard for him to have picked out two friends in the room. He was his own friend, was Peaceable Pete, as he had announced himself, and something of his history had drifted into Cactus Fork ahead of him, while what he had already done there had stamped him as a man of even greater nerve than his reputation had pronounced him.

"You know me? I just sling ther steel 'round loose when I get wild; an' what I hit I pin up ter dry. As fur you Dan Marble—hold yer age or I'll take a rib out! Now, how long has this thing been goin' on, an' what's it all about?"

"It may be your funeral, stranger—if you take a hand you can figure it out to ante up with the rest of the crowd. But if you'll take Dan Marble's advice you'll just draw out, for this game's about over."

As Marble spoke he turned toward Burro Bill and threw up his hand.

The words and gesture had a calming effect. The pistols that had been drawn by the hangers-on around the Ranch were returned to their receptacles, several that had been the foremost fell back, Burro Bill himself closed his teeth with a vicious snap, and the only men left with weapons out were the Indian and his late found backer.

The latter seemed a little surprised at the ready way in which the Fork had yielded before him. He looked around, his glittering eyes seeming to ask a question of every other eye they met; but there was no answer. Only, while he was dropping his knives back in his belt, Burro Bill, having sprung through the doorway by which he had entered, was hastening down the street, heading for Shorter's, in the hopes of being able to intercept the girl, who was, however, nowhere to be seen.

#### CHAPTER V.

##### A COUNSELOR IN HER DISTRESS.

WHEN Edna darted through the doorway of the saloon the act was mechanical, and she had no definite plan for escape. Her brain was in a whirl, and her mind refused to act. She thought she heard hurrying feet and voices calling upon her to stop, so she fled blindly forward.

As a result she naturally turned the wrong way; for having entered the house from the other side her instincts were, so to speak, turned around.

It was only when she gasped, stumbled, and almost fell, that she regained something of her wandering senses.

"Oh, how brave I am," she said to herself, bitterly. "I had a weapon and never thought to use it; at the first shadow of danger I was overwhelmed with fear. What good can such a thing as I do here where they are all tigers together? I could kill myself for shame, if I did not think I could amend. But I will do better. I will conquer this silly weakness, and win at all hazards."

"Very brave words, my friend, if you are certain of what they amount to; but are you sure the game is worth the powder? Perhaps you don't understand the hazards that you speak of as well as I do, and it might be well if you would take a little advice."

Edna was more than surprised.

She had seen no one near her, and had heard no one approaching; yet now, when she looked up, she saw the figure of a man with folded arms who was looking down upon her with what seemed to her to be a quiet gaze of pity.

Instantly she sprung to her feet, facing this intruder with all the courage she had vowed she would possess.

He did not seem to be a dangerous stranger, however. His voice was soft and well modulated, and his appearance was altogether different from that of the roughs of the Ranch, or even the honest miners who got off the stage at Shorter's. His face was covered by a long

beard; a broad-brimmed hat slanted down over his brow, and he was clad in a suit of black that was made after the fashions of the East.

"Who are you, sir?" she exclaimed. "What right do you undertake to give me advice? If you are a gentleman you will point out to me the way to the stage station, and allow me to go on my way unmolested."

"Gentlemen don't generally wander at large around Cactus Fork. It takes a full sized man with a belt of revolvers, and it's not very safe for him. It's pure goodness of heart, Miss Wheeler, that leads me to offer any suggestion. If you don't choose to heed you cannot, at least, deny the warning."

"How do you know my name? And answer my other question—who are you?"

"What difference does all that make, so long as I give you good advice?"

"Much. You know my name, you look at me as one who is not a stranger; I begin to believe that I know you, also."

"And what of that?"

The man smiled as he spoke. It was too dark to get the finer lines in his face, but Edna thought she could detect a mocking sneer. It really was imagination, and yet, all the same, the sneer was there.

"This!" she said, in a low, thrilling tone; "if you are the man I think you are, you are a deadly foe to me and mine. To follow advice of yours would be folly greater than any that ever I have dreamed of. Now tell me your name if you dare!"

"Oh! as to what I dare or dare not do, that has nothing to do with it. I find you in trouble, and guess that you have been in a great deal of danger. I want to save you from the chances of both in the future. If you won't be saved—that's your affair, not mine. As for my name: it is Harvey Hawlings Brandt—sometimes the prefix 'Judge' being added thereto. If it sounds familiar, so much the better. You will know that I am one of those men who never speak unless they have something to say."

"It is so much the worse. I was not wrong; you are the fiend himself. It was you who wrought ruin on my family, brought death to my father, and worse than death to my brother. I tell you, sir, I was looking for you. That you have found me is a sign that fate is at last in my favor. You have given me words of warning—I return them with interest. Beware! When the day comes, as come it will, that I can crush you, I will do it without remorse or mercy."

"That is right, little woman. That's the way I like to hear you talk it. But if I don't take care of you a little, while you're getting ready, I don't know what will become of you. I was late on the ground to-night, but it won't happen again. Drive on with your cattle train, then, and I'll see what I've lost when I finish my round up."

"You take care of me—you that slew my father, and would have murdered my brother by a false accusation! I—I—no, I cannot kill you in cold blood; but it is a sore temptation. Enough that I know you now, and that I have warned you. Another time I may not be able to hold my hand. For the present it is enough. You go your way and I will go mine!"

"Well, I declare!"

Judge Brandt's arms were unfolded and placed akimbo, and even in the darkness Edna could see—and it added to her anger—that he was looking over her with an amused glance. She was too angry to speak; and not quite angry enough to attempt anything desperate. It was bad enough to hate this man with a bitter abiding hatred; to have him laughing at her was more than she could bear. When the silence had lasted for a moment or two, she turned her face toward the town that had just been at her back, and hurried away.

"Keep straight ahead," Brandt called after her. "When you strike the green light in front of the 'Banjo' turn to your left, and you'll make Shorter's without trouble."

Then, with his arms again folded, he watched the trim figure that was flitting away in the darkness, and muttered to himself:

"She'll be apt to meet friends on the way."

#### CHAPTER VI.

##### AGAIN IN THE TOILS.

WITH her hand on the revolver that she carried in her bosom Edna went on, all the time considering whether the words of advice were honestly spoken, or a snare. Harvey Brandt, no doubt, was merciless enough to strike even her; and yet, as far as her memory would serve her, the directions were correct enough.

After a little appeared the green light, which had been hidden by the inequalities of the ground.

As she passed the "Banjo" saloon, she was quivering with expectation; but no one appeared to molest her. Turning to the left, she saw the house of which she was in search, not more than a couple of hundred yards away.

But just as she was congratulating herself on the fact that no one had noticed her, or probably would, in front of her a voice broke the stillness:



"Heavens an' earth, but I'm glad to see you! I'd given you up sure fer lost till I seen Bill layin' round in front of Shorter's, a-watchin' of it. Then I knowed you were all right, and I'd 'fraid for him red hot, if I hadn' been afeared of his gang might scoop you in while the frolic were goin' on."

Pocket Jimmy came forward as he spoke, with outstretched hand, and any amount of enthusiasm in his tone. This supreme audacity astonished Edna, who thought that there was nothing now that could astonish her.

"Why, you treacherous villain, how dare you approach me after the betrayal and violence I have met at your hands. Out of the way! I will shoot you down!"

She spoke so savagely that Hurley started back, evidently afraid that the finger which rested on the trigger of the cocked revolver at his head might contract before he had time to explain.

"Bless your soul, miss, you're either crazy or don't know nothin' of what's happened."

"I know enough. You betrayed me into the hands of a desperado—you seized me yourself. But that I was quick I might not now have been living. Yes, you are one of the villains who train under the orders of Judge Brandt. Beware, though. The time for punishment is at hand. I can at least unmask you and show you to the world at Cactus Fork as you are."

"Not very much can you tell them of me that they ain't aware of, and I reckon the Fork wouldn't take much stock in what you said, specially when they know'd you were throwing off on a pard that had purty nigh passed in because he held out for you. They say fur ungratitude mankind are ungrateful; but I say, for pure ungratitude, womankind takes ther cake and don't leave a rag on ther bush."

"Ingratitude? Ah, I know you now—and how much I had to be grateful to you for."

She did not believe a word that he was saying of course, but she temporized, giving him a chance for a hearing, which was what he wanted.

"Just look at me, miss, and then maybe you'll know. If I'd a-went back on you I'd have been all right; but I ain't. I tell you, I've been to the wars, just see, once. If you don't believe it feel of my head, and look at my clothes."

He stepped back a few paces to where the moonlight would shine directly on him.

There was not much room for doubting after that. He had evidently been somewhere, and come out on the further side of the little end of the horn.

His natty look was gone, and his clothing was torn and splashed with the blood that also stained the bandages with which his head was swathed.

"Maybe you'll believe me now. I hadn't more than got the door shut when a man sprung past me and froze onto you, while another knocked me down from behind—here's the mark under the ear now. You can feel it a-risin'. I don't know how long I lay there—I don't guess I lost my senses altogether, and it couldn't have been many minutes. Then I jumped up and did the best I could; but I ain't a very big man, and those chaps were giants, they were."

"And you expect me to believe this?"

Pocket Jimmy spoke with an earnestness that never seemed to doubt, and his eye sparkled as he noted what he was certain was a sign of credulity.

"If you look at me square you won't do nothing else. I've been right through the stamp mill, on your account, and Burro Bill and his pards were the men as sent me there. If Kerrigan hadn't come in to help me out I'd have went up the flume howling. They skipped then, and when I'd heard of the little side-show they had at the ranch, and that Bill was out—on yer trail like as not—I just waltzed around lively. Tie to me, though, and I'll see you through in the matter we've got on hand. You just come 'round and slide into Shorter's so there won't be any fuss to-night, and I'll see you in the morning."

He motioned with his hand to indicate the circuitous route that he wished her to take; but she shook her head with a short, grim laugh.

"You are either a knave or a coward; I want nothing to do with you. As for the man you call Burro Bill, let him stand in my road if he dares. I have learned enough of wisdom already to know that I must make my own way; and with this I give you and your crew warning to stand from under. I am here to save or to revenge, as it may turn out; but either way I will do my whole duty. Now stand aside."

She evidently was acquainted with the use of the weapon that she deliberately aimed at the little man before her, and yet, though for a moment the barrel was in line with his forehead, he did not shrink or falter.

On the contrary he stood facing her, with his arms folded, as if daring her to fire.

She looked at him steadily, and there was a contraction of her brows, as if she had decided to wait no longer.

Either he was foolishly reckless, or he knew something that Edna did not dream of.

The girl had her wits about her; but she

could not suspect. She advanced a step nearer and as Pocket Jimmy did not flinch she suddenly lowered the muzzle of her pistol until it was in a line with his shoulder and then pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell; but only a sharp click followed. The cartridge was worthless, for the weapon had been tampered with.

And while Hurley uttered a taunting laugh Edna, for the second time that night, felt an arm grasping her waist as the harsh voice of Burro Bill chuckled in her ear:

"Ha, yer thort ye'd play it fine on yours truly. I got yer now, missy; I got yer now."

Hurley had, in sporting parlance, been "playing it fine." He had held her therein conversation until his partner made his appearance.

## CHAPTER VII.

### SEVERAL FROM THE SHOULDER.

JUST when Hurley's plans had culminated in success Edna doubted the most his treachery, for she heard him utter a cry of seeming surprise and rage, and saw him spring forward at her assailant with a knife in his hand.

Then there was the sound of a blow, and she saw him drop suddenly, as though felled by a heavy stroke.

"That settles him. Now, Bill, off with her; we ain't got long to tarry."

"Yer right. A neat job it are. Pick up her pop gun thar, an see she don't drop nothin' ter leave a sign. When ther captain gits an eye on her orce thar'll be no more foolishness. An' give that durped leetle galoot another poult ter keep him cool till we gi' outen ther way."

There were two of the villains, then Edna grasping frantically at the wrist of the brawny paw over her mouth, gave also a sideways glance, and saw the man stooping forwards to pick up the revolver that had been forced from her grasp.

That glance did her soul good, for the man, whose fingers were just touching the dropped weapon, at that instant flew with a howl into the air, as though shot from a mortar.

There was a new actor on the stage.

He had come up silently, though without making any effort to conceal his coming, for naturally his step seemed to be noiseless as a panther's, and his movements as quick.

As the one man stooped the foot of the other shot out.

Then he turned fiercely on Burro Bill, who loosened his hold on his prisoner, and, with clinched fist, made one step to meet him, and then shot out a terrific blow.

Up went the right arm of the new-comer, in a graceful guard, while at the same time his left went out, straight as a die, the weight of his by no means narrow shoulders going with it.

Back went Burro Bill, for the first time in his life floored by one and the first left-handed blow.

Edna uttered a cry; but it was not at the fall of her assailant. She saw the man springing up who had first been felled, and in his fist he held a cocked revolver.

Her cry, and her outstretched hand did the work of warning. Quick as was the ruffian, the other was quicker; for his hand shot to his belt, and then up with a jerk, his finger tightening on the trigger of the self-cocking revolver as it rose.

There was a little shoot of flame and a sharp crack.

At the report the man dropped his weapon and once more fell.

This time he remained motionless, save for a quiver or two, while on his forehead a smutch of blood appeared.

Edna clasped her hands.

"Don't be alarmed, miss, he's not badly hurt if he has it where I wanted it; and I generally sling 'em pretty near the spot I aim for. Just wait a minute while I give this little rat a shaking up, and I'll go 'long and see you out of the draft."

He turned toward Pocket Jimmy with a sudden and fortunate whirl.

Though that snaky young man was lying where he had fallen, apparently lifeless, the quick eye of the champion detected a slight but suspicious motion. Hurley's hand was at his belt, and he had drawn a revolver which he was now turning without moving his wrist.

But the quick movement disconcerted him. He jerked up the weapon and fired a snap shot.

Away overhead hurtled the bullet, and before another could be fired Pocket Jimmy felt himself in a grasp of iron, raised high in air, and dashed to the ground with a violence that completely knocked all the sense out of his head, and the breath out of his body.

"Now, miss, I reckon you won't object to having a friend to tie to. My name is Walter Devlin and I'm lately from the East. If I can be of any service command me."

"You have already done me the greatest service that you could imagine, for which you have my thanks. I can ask no more; and as I see that my way is open to the stage station—Shorter's Hotel, they call it here—I shall not need or ask you to do more; but go at once."

"Oh, you're welcome enough. There's no great damage done, as yet, but it's just as well

that you should slide out before these fellows come around. If they're clear grit there'll be music in the air, and it will be time enough if you're 'round at the funeral. Good-night, little one, and don't forget that Walter Devlin is always at your service if you call for him."

Edna bowed and turned away slowly.

She had had her confidence so terribly abused that she was inclined to distrust all mankind.

Yet there was something about this young man, who had come so gallantly to her rescue, that drew her. When she had gone a few steps she paused and looked over her shoulder.

He was standing where she had left him; but was quietly lighting a cigar. Evidently he intended to remain and finish up with the three men when they came to their senses and their feet.

Further on she saw a little cluster of men, at the door of the Banjo. They had been attracted by the noise of the shot and seemed about to come to investigate.

For the sake of the young man she wished no further trouble. She called to him:

"Mr. Devlin!"

He removed the cigar from his mouth, and stepped forward, with an inquiring look on his face.

"I cannot leave you alone, here, to perhaps be slaughtered in my quarrel; and I do not care to remain. Come with me at least as far as the hotel, and promise me that you will have no more trouble with these men if you can avoid it, for to-night at least. You can no doubt defend yourself against them singly; but should the three together attack you the result might be dreadful. Besides, I think that some of their friends are coming to join them, and you cannot successfully fight the town."

"Thank you, miss, for your interest; though I will be able to take care of myself until the time comes to cash in. It is just as you choose, however. Come! If we are going to run away the sooner we begin the better."

This Devlin had a pleasant, laughing sort of voice, that won on her more and more as she heard him speak. He treated her proposal as though it came from a child that he was willing to humor, and he moved away at her side with his free but silent step.

Evidently he did not intend to intrude his opinions any further than was necessary, for he returned his cigar to his mouth and was smoking softly.

"Mr. Devlin," said Edna, as she stepped safely upon the porch, which seemed to be vacant.

"I have had a lesson, and yet I must confide in some one. Tell me; do you know of such a camp as Eden City; whether it is what one would call a city of refuge, and how one is to get there?"

"Eden City! I've heard the name, and if one-half that is said about it is true it must be a rattling find. But then the half never is true. You see some one starts a story—maybe only by guess-work—and it grows and grows. Eden City may be a sure enough camp with ten men making a fortune, or a thousand starving. There's a good many started for it; and none ever came back. It's supposed to lie somewhere among the sand-hills of the desert, away south. I've an idea that the gulf is the true road to it; but I can't wait for the gulf."

"And you think there is such a place?"

"I'm cautious about what I believe, but I've heard enough to make me think it's a sure enough thing, and I'm going to find it. But if you'll pardon me for the advice, miss, it's not the thing for you to go ramping around in search of it. If you have any friends that have set out for that region you had better give me your message and wait till I come back."

"And you are going? Oh, if I only knew!"

"Just as well that you don't know. And if I'm not mistaken you're not safe here a minute either. Take the back track for a more civilized country. Even Poker Flat would be better than this. I've got some friends over there that would stand behind you if you happened to need them, and here you'll hardly have a man to back you, while a dozen wouldn't be too many. Captain Ghoul runs the town—though they don't say much about him."

"Captain Ghoul! And who may he be?"

"A mighty bad man, and the boss of a gang of just such brutes as the ones that were putting up a job on you to-night. Don't you trust 'em—or any one else that offers to lead you to Eden City."

"But you—if you are going to journey thither, why might I not go in your company? There are reasons why I should at least make the effort. You are brave and honest, and from what I have seen to-night, know the ways of this country as well as any. Can you not help me?"

"No, little woman, not to such a journey; and it's because I know the country that I say it. I'm a fool for risking it; but you would be stark, staring crazy. Go back and wait. If I find the way perhaps I can tell you something about it. If I never come back, you're that much ahead."

"If you never come back! What, then, can happen to you?"



The young man gave a short, hard, bitter laugh.

"What innocence! You have had a taste of what may happen, to-night—and that is nothing. Three men against one is no fair show; but I have had to fight a town. Good-night—and go back."

"Never! Good-night—but I will see you again. Perhaps I will even dare to trust you. I am a woman, alone; but a woman with a purpose, and nothing shall turn me back. If you will not aid me another will—though perhaps not as well. But beware of those villains we have left behind us. They may be lying in wait for you. I could not rest easy if I thought harm was to come to you from me."

"If you bring me no more harm than that which comes from Burro Bill and his pards I will rest content. Good-night, and good-by. I wish you would take my advice. If you will not you must travel your own gait."

"Good-night; but not good-by."

She cast the words after him, for he had turned away as he finished speaking. When he did not answer she watched him gliding away with his noiseless, pantherish step, going straight toward the green light that hung at the Banjo saloon.

"A handsome sport he is; but beware of him," whispered a voice in her ear, and she felt a light touch on her shoulder.

Looking around, with a start, Edna saw that she was not alone, and that probably there had been a listener during her interview; but for the moment she could not make out what manner of person it was. She was only conscious of two blazing eyes, looking eagerly into her own.

It took a second and a third glance to tell her that the intruder was a woman, young, fancifully dressed in a semi-masculine costume, and with a face that was wonderfully beautiful.

#### CHAPTER VIII.

##### PEACEABLE PETE.

WHEN Devlin turned away from the porch of the stage-station he looked sharply ahead at the spot where he had had the little trouble with Burro Bill and his confederates.

They had disappeared; but whether they had made a retreat, or whether they were lying in wait for him, concealed behind one of the neighboring shanties, remained to be proved.

"I may as well go the entire figure," Devlin muttered to himself, "though, in Cactus Fork, a man without a pard is about as badly off as a cat in purgatory without claws. I'll make the rounds anyhow, and find them somewhere if they don't find me first. I'll begin with the Ranch."

He moved away rapidly, and soon found his way to the place he had aimed for. He passed a dozen men on the way, but met with no interruption. At the door he halted for an instant, listening to the sounds of boisterous merriment that came from within.

It was not fear that restrained him; but a desire, if possible, to learn who might be within before entering.

While he lingered he was startled at a voice close behind him:

"Don't be bashful, stranger. Hump yourself and sail right in. Ef yer don't find 'em hyar pack up yer lay out an' go on to the next saloon, though ef yer after pay dirt hyar's the dead sore place ter find it. Reef right in, an' I, Peaceable Pete, are ther rooster that'll see yer through. Dog-gone 'em, I owe 'em all one apiece, an' I'll begin at ther Ranch."

"You're a fraud!" exclaimed Devlin, wheeling like lightning, and confronting the man who had appeared at his elbow.

"Who's a fraud? Don't you stroke me ther wrong way, young man, er ther fur 'll begin ter fly outside. I war lookin' fur a pard, an' when I seen you I war willin' ter freeze right on; but I tell yer when yer talk ter me that way, ther's goin' ter be war."

"You're a fraud, all the same. You're no more Peaceable Pete than I am."

"I ain't, eh? Wa-al, hyar's about a dozen little whistlers ez sez clean ther t'other way."

The man's hand was on one of the knives in his belt as he spoke, and his tone was one of surly defiance.

"Oh, well, if you want trouble, tumble in; I'm waiting for the chance; but you don't rope me in there, raise up a riot and then slip out with the lump on my back. I'll finish up with you first, and then I'll see what the Roosters of the Ranch are made of."

"That's business. I reckon ye'r talkin' hoss sense. There's fun afloat now, an' somebody 'll git just about enough ter sharpen up his appetite. Hyar's fur ye. How d'yer want it?"

"Take your choice. I'm heeled all 'round. The ball is rolling—make your bets."

"I jinner'll use a knife; but I've a set ov pop-guns in me boots ef you'll give me er chance ter draw 'em. Take yer hands outen yer pockets an' we'll start fair. It ain't no show fur me ter chip in when you hold ther drop."

"I've got the drop, and I'm going to keep it. Take water, or you go to the bone-yard. You're on the wrong trail when you come out to hunt me."

Devlin spoke as carelessly as though he was

calling for drinks at the White Elephant on Broadway, but his hands remained easily dropped in the side pockets of his coat, where two suspicious protuberances showed the probable location of a pair of derringers.

"Dog-gone ef I don't take water, then?"

Peaceable Pete jerked the words out in some disgust, and yet there was a tinge of brusque good-humor in his tone. He held his hands out to show that they were weaponless, and waited for Devlin's next move.

"See here, man, who put you up to this? You're no slouch with the tools, and have nerve enough for a dozen. What made you come fooling 'round me?"

"Couldn't tell you, pard. It wouldn't be any better fur your health, an' it might make me just ther sickest sport on ther road. Thar won't be any questions asked ov you; but if thar is, jist tell 'em you got to yer pockets afore I could turn a knife, an' I lost my sand. I'll back yer up in it, fur yer dropped ter my game so sudden I can't help but play you fair."

"Who is it that's after me? Come! Man to man now; out with the truth."

"I'll never tell, an' ye needn't ax me; but ef I war you I'd let the Rooster's Ranch go fur another night, an' go an' bunk in. Mighty unwholesome you'll find it in thar. So long. We won't go in together."

Peaceable Pete turned away as he spoke, leaving Devlin more perplexed than troubled, though he made no effort to detain him.

"Fun afloat as usual, but a new game. What had this man to do with me? He didn't come up to his work very willingly, and he don't seem like a hired assassin. There's something worth looking up in it; but I've seen the last of him for to-night, and by to-morrow he'll be out of the burg. Well, here goes for the Roosters."

With this determination on his lips he flung open the door, and entered the long room from which Edna had fled.

The little incident of the earlier part of the night seemed altogether forgotten.

There were twenty or thirty men, drinking, gambling, singing, shouting and carousing around generally.

There was scarcely a man there who had not a villainous countenance, or who was free from scar or wound, and it would have been hard to have picked out one without a record.

Noiselessly as Devlin had seemed to enter a dozen faces were upturned on the instant, and a comparative hush fell on the room, though there were enough who never noticed the newcomer. It might be that, while some were waiting for him, others had no notice of the game.

Devlin did not seem at all disconcerted by the battery of glances.

He walked carelessly across the floor and took his stand in front of the bar.

"Look here, sports!" he exclaimed, in a tone loud enough to attract the attention of a dozen or two of the nearest.

"I'm not looking for fun, but if it comes in my road I won't throw it over my shoulder. I want to give this crowd warning, right here and now."

The dozen that had been looking and listening jumped to their feet, while the rest of the room turned up their ears. It was a square challenge, and only one thing could follow. A lion-tamer might as well go into a cage of strange wild beasts without his whip.

"Some of you men set up little game to-night, and it didn't work. They tried it on again and then I was around. If Burro Bill and his pards don't need plasters before to-morrow mornin', they've got tougher heads than the ordinary run. I'm not gunning for Burro Bill, though; but I am going for his boss. If there's anybody here that knows Captain Ghoul I want him to tell that party that he's got to jump that trail he's on or he'll hear from me again, and I'll talk solid."

"Who ther thunder be you, young man?" growled the nearest Rooster. "We don't want any picayune mud-slinger in store clothes ter come in hyar an' tell us how ter run this camp. You'd better light out right now, afore the boys rise at yer. Ef Burro Bill bez went under, er any one ov his pards, there's a small child 'bout your size ez'll go in outen ther damp."

"That is the way I like it; I'm here now, and to-morrow maybe I won't be; maybe you'd like to start in with me now? Don't be bashful, one or a dozen, it's all the same. I mean to give you toughs a lesson, and maybe Captain Ghoul will know what I mean. I passed through Poker City, and I left word with my friends. It's time for him to get up and dust—him and his pards."

"See hyar, what yer drivin' at? D'yer mean ter call us pards or Captain Ghoul? Ef yer does, take it back, er by ther jumpin' Jericho there'll be dead meat for breakfast."

"Maybe you want a lunch now, my friend. If you're at all hungry, don't be holding off fer the second table. I came in here to lay out a bill of fare, and I'm going to do it."

"Oh! you're too fresh, young man. We've heard yer through. Git up an' git. We're peaceable Roosters in hyar, now; but when they feel ther twitch at ther tail-feathers, they're

ready ter bite. Git on ther huff, er ye'll go on er shutter!"

"Scarcely; I'm waiting on your boss; but if you want to try a hand before he comes, you'll get all you want, and a little more. I know just such shanghaiers as you, from the ground up. You won't stand the work—one clip and you're off!"

Devlin's voice was taunting, and his object could not be mistaken. If Peaceable Pete had intended to involve him in a row, it was certain that that object would be gained without any outside urging.

The dozen that were up moved closer in a solid mass. The rest, that had been seated until now, rose up. Some few cast anxious glances toward the doors and windows. In case of the young man offering any decided resistance it was as well to have an avenue of escape from the pandemonium that would follow.

But the greater part joined the throng that, suddenly and as though by a preconcerted movement, surged up toward Walter Devlin.

No weapons were drawn, but with clinched fists a dozen threw themselves at him, and foremost of the crowd came the man that had acted as spokesman for the Roosters. With set teeth and blazing eyes he struck with terrific force at the smiling face that was just within distance, while behind him rose a score of encouraging voices:

"Down with him!" "Off with his head!" "Give him ther gafts!" "Let him feel how it goes to be kicked by a Rooster!"

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### A ROW AT THE ROOSTER'S RANCH.

ONE smiling man against a dozen howling roughs—it seemed as though Walter Devlin was crazy, for he had deliberately provoked a contest which, by all the rules of such matters at Cactus Fork, must end either in terrible maiming or death.

Nevertheless, Mr. Devlin, if he trusted in his own prowess, did not do so altogether without reason.

He knew pretty nearly how hard he could strike, and could rely on his muscle every time. He was quick as lightning and almost as vicious.

One moment he was lounging in front of the bar, with a careless smile; the next his fist shot forward with tremendous power, and a shade the quicker.

The sharp crack of the blow sounded something less than the report of a pistol, and the man who caught it went down as though shot.

He fell right in the way of the rush, and three or four stumbled over him, checking the coming crash; and in the momentary confusion Devlin seized his opportunity.

"Down in front!" he exclaimed. "Front seats reserved for ladies, and the free list absolutely suspended! Syksey take the butt! No half price for children!"

Right into the midst of the crowd he swung, striking right and left, left and right, while with every blow a man went down.

For a few moments there was a hideous medley of sounds, snarling, yelling, and the steady crack, crack of a hard fist falling on upturned faces. Mr. Devlin was at work without discount.

The men that thought they could beat him to a jelly found out their mistake, for the prospect seemed to be just the other way. Every blow was hard enough to drive a spike.

In the midst of it all the door by which Edna had made her entrance opened, and a face appeared, framed in the passage-way.

Captain Bascomb stood there, looking amazedly at the fracas that was going on. He could see that half-a-dozen men were scattered around on the floor, while an ordinary-sized young man was sending in stroke after stroke as though he weighed a ton.

As he gazed for a few seconds at the fray one of the roughs came spinning round and round from the heart of the crowd, with blood spouting in a stream from his broken nose.

At the doorway this badly-damaged individual ceased his gyrations and collapsed in a heap on the floor.

He was not senseless, or even seriously hurt; but, for the moment, in ring parlance, "he was all abroad."

Right at the captain's feet he dropped, and Bascomb, giving a single glance downward, caught him by the coat collar, and half swung, half dragged him into the narrow hall, closing the door behind him.

Giving a wicked shake he raised the man to his feet and banged him soundly against the wall.

"Now, you weltering idiot, what is all this about, and what is going on in there? It's enough to make a saint sick to have a pack of fools like you to handle. Out with it! What is the trouble?"

"Heaven an' fury, capt'n, hole on a minnit! I've got a three-stamp mill a-goin' in my nob. I don't know nothin'."

"You don't. Then curse you I'll see if I can't let a little knowledge in. If you can't tell me what I want to know I'll cut your worthless throat and look out for a man that can. You hear me, say?"

The captain never joked, and there was a



deadly earnestness in his tone that brought the staggering victim to his senses a great deal quicker than a shower bath would have done. The captain meant just what he said, and so the man with the broken nose understood for, throwing up both his hands, he pressed them to his head for an instant; and, in that time, mentally shook himself together.

"He's just Satan let loose, and strikin' the war-path on wheels. He dropped to the leetle game Burro Bill was up to ter-night an' come in here ter slaughter ther crowd. He swore ther gang trained under Captain Ghoul, an' that he war goin' ter lambaste er few ter give ther captain an' the rest ov ther galoots warnin' fur ter keep hands off."

"Off of what, or whom?" said the captain sharply, though he was a little mollified by the clearness of the rapid statement.

"How does I know? Ther gal, I reckon. Burro Bill hed an intervoo with him alone, in ther dark, an' I s'pose he'd sell hisself fur two bits now, an' throw in er corpse."

"Ah, I see now more clearly. He's a friend of the girl's. Good enough! If he is her only one she won't have backing long. We've gone too far to back down, though Bill and that scamp, Hurley, deserve hanging for this bungling. Watch out, now; there will be dead meat before the night is much older. Give me your revolver."

Without hesitation the man did as he was bidden.

"I just want one shot. When I've had that I'll give the barker back and you clear out and see that you have a load in the barrel before you meet any one else."

"All right. You do the work an' I'll risk ther blame fallin' on me."

"Hold your cursed yawp then. It's time to work, if the boys haven't done the business already."

Holding up the muzzle of the cocked revolver, ready to be dropped like a flash to its aim, Captain Bascomb silently opened the door, and once more peered cautiously into the room.

Devlin was still at work, and still holding the winning cards, though momentarily screened from view. Then there was a break in the ranks between them, and Captain Bascomb seemed at last to have his chance.

He made the mistake, however, of waiting an instant too long; for, just as he was letting his pistol fall to the level, he heard a savage chuckle in his rear.

He had no suspicion of a movement against him from any direction—least of all from the rear; yet instinct bid him beware, and like a flash he wheeled, though the fraction of a minute too late.

An iron hand was on his throat.

From behind one man had approached, with a thoroughly noiseless tread, and suddenly hurled himself upon Bascomb and his ally, with only that one faint sound of warning.

The captain had supposed himself to be a powerful man; but this assailant seemed a giant who, holding a man in either hand, sprang through the doorway, uttering a tremendous yell as he came.

And at almost the instant he made his appearance there was a tremendous crash, as the candles that were suspended over the center of the room dropped to the floor, and a second later the other lights were extinguished.

In the darkness the men of Cactus Fork stood motionless. While they were uncertain which way to turn, they heard a clear, cheerful voice just at the doorway:

"That's my style when I'm on the muscle; but when I come back from Eden City I'll be on the shoot. Steer clear of me and my friends if you don't want to strike a red hot tornado!"

As he ceased speaking, his words were emphasized with a bang. Captain Bascomb and his man had been swung forward as though discharged from a mortar.

Very speedily did Buck Kerrigan produce a light; but when the room was once more illuminated, Devlin had disappeared. Bascomb, though not seriously injured, lay in a senseless heap on the floor near the bar, and of his mysterious assailant not a trace was to be found. Whether he had followed Devlin through the door, or gone back the way he had come, was alike uncertain; and what was more, no one in the room, so far as could be known, had had even a glimpse of him. Outside there was a single pistol report, and then all was still.

Bascomb was shaken and bruised, and for the moment devoid of sense; but under the rude ministrations of his followers, he quickly recovered sufficiently to sit up and stare around.

"Where is he, curse you all! Have you let him get away? If he has—"

He shook his fist to finish the threat that was too terrible to utter, and glared up at the men that were bending over him.

"He's skipped, captain; but the boys are after him. They gave him a fair show on the muscle, and he held too big a hand; but they'll rake in his chips on the pop-guns. Don't you forget it. Are you hurt?"

"A thousand curses, no! But which way did he go—the man that caught me foul? Who was he? Speak out."

Bascomb, in a tearing rage, was a bad man every way; and the men that were reckless enough to answer straight were the ones that were either laid out, or had gone out on the trail of Devlin. The little group around the captain looked doubtfully at one another. After a momentary hesitation a man in the rear spoke, not without a quaver in his voice:

"We didn't see nary man, 'ceptin' ther young sport on wheels, that stood off ther house, an' won. Ef thar war another one, he didn't show up till ther lights went out."

"Another one there was," said the captain, his tone suddenly moderating into one of deadly coolness. "A six-footer at least, with a hand like a barn-door. That's the man to look for. As for the other scoundrel—didn't you hear him say he was on the way to Eden City? Let him alone; he will never come back."

## CHAPTER X.

### TWO GIRL PARDS.

EDNA WHEELER was more angered than startled by the appearance of the strange young woman upon the steps of Shorter's Hotel.

What business had she, lurking in the shadows, and listening to what Devlin had been saying?

As for the advice, Edna wanted none of it, and would have brushed angrily past, but the girl spoke again, and held up her finger at the same time with an archness that attracted.

"You find strange friends, Miss Wheeler. If you are searching for a guide to Eden City, why not try me?"

"You, too?" exclaimed Edna, not at all mollified by the proposition. "Every one seems to know me, and suspect my mission. Perhaps it is not suspicion, though! I would not be surprised to learn that you are all in league together. If so, I will warn you, as I would warn the rest. Beware of the day of settlement. When that comes some one will receive due punishment, without regard to sex or station."

"That is right. It does one good to say their say out; I've said mine dozens of times when I had better kept my tongue to myself. But after you get through with what they call chin music among the boys, wouldn't it be a good idea to listen to a little solid sense from a person that talks by card?"

"I'm going through to Eden City; and it's not certain that any one else is. I like your looks and I like your nerve; and if you're not very wise you will be before you get through with the contract you have to carry. What say you? Shall we go together?"

The speaker had a soft, smooth voice, that insensibly won upon Edna, disposed as she was to doubt, more or less, this unsexed girl, with the tones of a woman, the words of a man and the dress of both sexes combined. A girl of impulses, Edna Wheeler trusted right and left and in reality was not entirely discouraged by her late experiences. She was willing to try again; especially when she heard some one so confidently speak of leading her to Eden City. Why should she not take advantage of the offer?

There seemed to be no reason, if it was *bona fide*; and of that she could assure herself before going too far. But first of all: who was this who wanted to scrape acquaintance with her? She asked the question, and with some interest awaited the answer.

"Who am I? Come! Don't ask the question. You weren't so particular when you struck Pocket Jimmy; and he didn't offer half as much as I do. Take me as you find me; and if that won't suit you I'll give you for handle 'Gertie of the Gulch.' There's mighty few of the old-timers from here to Frisco that won't tell you, when they hear that name, that I'm square to tie to."

"And can you tell me something of the place that we two seem bound for?"

"Eden City! Well, no. Who can? One man, perhaps; and he won't speak. But such a camp there is, or was, and I am bound there. When we find it we'll know all about it. It may be a paradise on earth; it may be a den of thieves. What difference to us, so we find there the men we search for. If you can trust me give me your hand—I will swear that mine is honestly offered. If you can't—go back. It is not too late to make your escape if you go at once. Were I in your place, either way sunrise should not find me at Cactus Fork."

"It shall not!" exclaimed Edna suddenly. "I will trust you. I can but be deceived once more. There shall be no lingering, if once you can make the way clear. Tell me what it is you propose to do; and you will see whether I dare or dare not follow you. This is no place for confidences; but come inside, and I will listen. You were not without a purpose when you spoke to me to-night; and whatever it was you have won."

The young woman who had given her name as Gertie of the Gulch laughed musically and answered:

"I always do win. Sometimes it's luck, and sometimes it's nerve; and sometimes it's the way I play my cards; but whatever it is, your fortune's made from the time you back my game."

I'm not mistaken in you, either, as time will show. We will be on the trail before daylight, and in a month we will make or break."

The two went in together. As they disappeared Pocket Jimmy rose up from the side of the porch, where he had wormed himself.

He had begun to look the worse for wear; but he had a hard head and plenty of courage; so that he never once thought of giving up on the strength of meeting with a little misadventure.

He was puzzled, though; and he looked curiously at the doorway through which the two girls had disappeared.

"So that's the new lay-out, is it? Blame my cats, but I reckon I'd better hold out on the next turn! There's four cards in the box, or I'm a Dutchman, an' two of 'em is queens. Bascomb's no fool; but till I see which way the cat is going to hop I'll say nothing. He might rake in his capper along with the rest. I wonder if I haven't dropped to a little game?"

Hurley scratched his head and walked soberly away. He had been watching Devlin and Edna Wheeler; when Gertie of the Gulch appeared—and he saw her some moments before she made herself visible to Edna—all his attention was turned toward her. He ran some risks, as he very well knew, but he managed to hear their conversation, and now, as he went away, he made the most of it.

Pocket Jimmy walked boldly enough. It made no difference, now, whether he was seen or not. In fact, he debated whether it would not be as well to give the two a hint that he had heard them; and he would have done so if he had not been afraid of an attempt at summary punishment.

"It wouldn't do. I'd like her to know that I'm fly to her game; but she might make no end of a row right down here, and it don't pay to raise a riot when you can't hit back. But your time is coming, Jimmy. Just lay low and see if it don't."

Hurley was in luck in more ways than one, since, in his pursuit of information he had been saved from the broil at the Ranch, toward which he bent his way. As he came near, a single man sprang out of the doorway; and a moment later a man leaped from a window, and hastily aiming at the fugitive, who was now some distance in advance, fired one shot.

The distance was too great, for sure shooting. The fugitive ran on, the pursuer followed; and both vanished around the corner of a neighboring shanty. Then there was the sound of a horse galloping away, and Pocket Jimmy was reasonably assured that the first man had made good his escape.

## CHAPTER XI.

### TWO COOL SPORTS.

CAPTAIN BASCOMB showed his judgment in not taking further trouble to find Walter Devlin.

Though he had given another and sufficient reason the real fact was that the young man was already beyond his reach, going at a rate that but few horsemen could equal. In twenty hours he put Cactus Jack a long distance behind him, and at sunset he was coming carelessly down the mountain trail, and though the spot was just fit for an ambuscade Devlin did not seem at all concerned about the chances. He was lounging in his saddle in not an ungraceful attitude, and was chewing away at the end of his cigarette in a way that betokened abstraction of mind, though there was a smile on his handsome face, and his eyes twinkled. Evidently he was not thinking of danger.

He finally turned around a bowlder, that was as large as a good-sized house, and immediately before him was a strip of sloping but comparatively unbroken ground, while beyond stretched the broad, unbounded sea of sand.

It was at the instant that this prospect of the desert came into sight that the spotted Mustang gave a great snort of surprise and fear; and made a quick movement, as though about to whirl and flee.

Walter Devlin was careless but he was quick. His hand tightened on the rein; his knees closed in on the flanks of his alarmed steed, and he held the animal as steadily in its tracks as though it had grown there. Then he calmly looked around to see what it was that had caused the fright.

At the same time he heard a low, savage growl.

It was to be supposed that Mr. Devlin had weapons, and that he knew how to use them; but he made no movement. He only let his eyes wander along toward the spot, in the lee of the rock from which the sound proceeded.

Lying in the shadow he saw a human figure, and on each side, seated in perfect repose, and eying him with an unblinking stare, was a huge lion—not the long-maned lion of the African deserts, of course; but the American lion, panther, cougar, tiger or whatever other name particular location or variation of species may have given to the animal.

A third was crouched on the ground, with its head resting between its fore-paws, and it was from this one that the growl had come.

"I say, stranger," called out Cool Sport Dev-



lin, "have you the upper hand of those kittens sure? If you haven't, let me know, so I can be ready to begin business with the first snarl that sounds like earnest. I've handled such darlings myself in my time, and it don't do to be too confiding when they've been short of food for a day or so."

The human figure rolled lazily over, and a sharp but not altogether unpleasant voice responded:

"That's your conundrum, sport, and if you don't know the answer better than I do, you're in a heap of trouble. I found them lying around loose, and they seem to have taken a fancy to me. If they freeze right onto you I sha'n't give a whimper."

Walter Devlin was not charmed by the statement, though, to tell the truth, he did not believe it. He looked keenly at the speaker, to see what manner of man he might be, but the position was rather unfavorable for face-reading. What he saw was a young man of his own age apparently, and much his own size and build, though clad in a rough and ready costume of the border, that contrasted strongly and strangely with his own suit of store clothes. At his side hung a knife and revolver, while under his arm lay a weapon that exactly matched Devlin's Winchester. In the distance, several hundred yards away, a spotted mustang, the counterpart of his own, was standing, looking uneasily at the little group.

"Well, you've seen us all; now what do you make out of us?" continued the stranger after a momentary silence, which lasted while Devlin was taking an inventory of what he saw.

"Don't be so perpendicular in your style, my friend. You all look as if you belonged to a happy family, and I can swear that I don't want to intrude. I did think of camping somewhere in this neighborhood, but maybe I'd better ride on."

"That's talk; but allee samee maybe you wouldn't mind explaining where you'll move to. I wouldn't mind going along."

"Thanks for the offer; but room heats company any day. You and your kittens go, then, and I'll stay."

"Go! Where in thunder do you calculate on our going to? I've just come over the divide myself; and straight ahead it's fifty miles to water, and infernal doubtful if you strike it then. It's here we stay to-night, so you may just as well pile down and stake out without fooling more time. If you don't like the cats shoot 'em. It may make a lively old time around here; but I don't see why two of us shouldn't come out ahead. Where you bound for anyway?"

The stranger looked critically at Devlin, while the panthers, which seemed tame enough, yawned and gazed around them with that far-away look that is natural to the race in repose.

The equestrian, for answer, slid lightly from his horse, slipped off the bridle, opened a knot or two and took off his saddle, which he flung to the ground.

Then he gave the mustang a light slap on the shoulder which sent it bounding away.

After that he opened a blanket, unslung a canteen, opened a haversack, and seating himself unconcernedly, began to eat his supper—which was frugal enough to delight the heart of the most conscientious anchorite.

The three cougars condescended to notice him more particularly. They rose from their stations and came gliding toward him.

Devlin looked up sharply, and they halted, throwing themselves lazily down, and watching him with an unblinking earnest stare. He held up a bit of cracker toward the nearest and it opened its mouth. He tossed the morsel and it was caught and swallowed in a lazy, satisfied way, that showed the animal was in no great want of food. With the other two he went through the same performance. Man and beasts fraternized on the spot. All the time the stranger was watching with a half-anxious, half-amused look. Finally he broke in quietly:

"Say! you couldn't toss a little of that provender over this way? I just emptied my grip-sack into the bowels of these beasts, and I haven't a morsel left for my own supper. Lucky I took a lunch as I came along, or I'd be confounded near starving."

"Then they're really not yours?" asked Devlin, as he picked out a fair share of the contents of his haversack. "I generally take things as they come; but this is a little the queerest lead I ever struck. They're somebody's darlings, though, and I'm not sure yet, that they ain't yours. Who are you, anyhow?"

"You haven't answered my question yet; but that don't matter. I'm Dane Darringer, and very much at your service; and it's gospel truth I don't know any more about the kittens than you do yourself. I camped here for the night, and while I was staking out my horse they got the bulge on me, so I made the best of it. As they were friendly like I let them have their own way, but if you hadn't come I s'pose they'd have eaten me before morning."

Devlin laughed. He had found a man as nonchalant as himself.

"You're my style, old man, to a T. If it wasn't too much trouble I'd say, shake. You

had the nerviest part of the contract, for I thought if they didn't scalp you there wasn't any particular reason why they should scalp me. I'll answer your question now, since I see how the land lies. I am Walter Devlin, of no particular town or city, but inhabitant in general of the world, and I am bound for Eden City, in the Valley of Rest."

The man who had given his name as Dane Darringer started visibly.

"Then there are two fools in the world instead of one. I'm bound that way myself. But, where did you ever hear anything about Eden City?"

"That's something else. There's not many heard of the Valley of Rest; and they do say it's a bad thing to happen to a man to get started on that trail. Of all that have set out there's never a one come back. I reckon you and I will go with the crowd."

"See here," interposed Darringer. "Honor bright, do you think there is any such place?"

"Why shouldn't there be?"

"It's not hard to reckon up a reason for the question. First and last, in a quiet way, there's a good many set out for the city; but in all my life I never knew whether one of them got there. If they did they never came back to tell."

"If that is the case, what are you going for?"

"I am going because I hate."

"And I," interposed Devlin, with a short, hard laugh, "because I love. Two fools well met. Do you know anything about the road to this earthly paradise?"

"Not much. It's mostly desert and dry sand. I have heard that from here to the gulf you won't find enough water to wet a snipe's bill, and after you get along a bit you'll find a fair turnpike of skulls. We're not the first fools that have tried the game, and if we turn our toes up it's some consolation to know that we won't be the last."

He spoke in a dry, hard tone. As he finished the three panthers turned their muzzles up toward the setting sun, and uttered in concert a long drawn, mournful whine. Night was not far distant, and the two men, in the face of their strange surroundings, for a moment or two, were silent.

## CHAPTER XII. HANDS UP.

As the two listened they first noticed that the three brutes had changed their position and were bending forward with erected ears. Then they heard the distant sound of some one approaching.

"The kittens have their eyes open; is it a cat or a mouse?"

Devlin looked thoughtfully at the three animals. They were a problem rather than a mystery, and he showed for the first time a touch of trouble on his face, which his companion was not slow to discover.

"It makes little difference to us," answered Darringer, cheerfully. "We're on the road to Eden City, and if we strike the Valley of Rest before we get there, the world will be short two handsome sports. But you can bet high on one thing. We won't go under before our time comes. I don't believe we'll be in much more danger than we've been in for the last hour. If a man can make friends with a trio of mountain lions he ought to be ready for most things he can find on the road. Ah! There's something at last. Good-by, kittens, and if you give Dave Darringer a wide berth in the future, he's not going to grumble about it."

A shrill whistle had rung out on the evening breeze, and at the sound the three panthers arose, sniffed the air eagerly, and then, without even a backward glance, bounded away, turning around the huge rock, and following the very trail by which Walter Devlin had come. Probably some one was calling them, and the brutes obeyed the signal.

The two men listened for a long time, but the footsteps came no nearer. They seemed to have turned aside, and the sounds, waxing fainter and fainter, finally died away altogether.

"There's a wrinkle anyway," suggested Darringer, after drawing a long breath. "If that party is on the same trail I'll bet considerable more than even money that he knows the way. If we're sharp enough, there's a chance to find the road to Eden City."

"That's a point, pard, that I've been thinking of myself, but it's too late to take it up now—and it's no bad plan to start twenty-four hours or so behind. This here is the last case of operations we're sure of until we bring up in purgatory or the Gulf of Mexico. If you've had anything like the thought I think you have, it will be just as well to make the most of it and take a good rest. When we do swing loose, we've got to run clean through, and it's pretty certain to be a hundred and fifty mile jaunt, without grass or water."

"Wouldn't it be as well to try and see who the party is that is cavorting around with a body-guard of tigers?"

"Thankee, but I don't just prefer. The kittens were perfectly agreeable as long as they

ran their own clam-wagon, but as soon as some one else begins to toot the horn for the concern, no men nor angels could tell what they would be like. And if you think you can crawl on to their camp without their spying you out, you're a dog-goned sight bigger fool than you look."

"Correct you are. And when such pet-lambs are gamboling around, it might be a good plan to sleep with one eye open for fear of a visit from the shepherd, I begin to suspect. Strikes me that somewhere—in a dream, maybe—I heard of a man they call Panther Bill out here on the trail. I didn't put much stock in it then, but I begin to believe it now."

"That's the identical point, I'll bet Pharaoh's chariot to a clam-wagon! But what of it! There's nothing going to stop two sports that have started for Eden City. I've powerful good medicine, and I'm willing to take my chances. The man or beasts that get away with me are welcome to all the profits on the contract. The question before this court and jury is whether we're going to ride the road together."

"Anything to keep peace in the family. I'll take any man, that has nerve for the journey, as a pard as far as Eden City. When we get there, every tub stands on its own bottom. I'd drop my own brother if he stood in my way, and if your affairs happen to run crossways to mine, stand from under."

"That's the way to talk it. Perds to Eden City, then each for himself. Give us your hand on that, and we'll get ready to bunk in. If there is such a place we'll find it."

Devlin moved away carelessly from the spot, and having looked around to acquaint himself thoroughly with the lay of the land, gave a low, trilling whistle.

At the call, the mustang that he had turned loose came galloping to the spot. He had taken a drink from the water-pool and then wandered near the tethered mustang, cropping the herbage, and showing no tendency to leave the spot. Now he submitted to being lariatied without a sign of impatience.

When that had been completed, Devlin returned and, arranging it at a more convenient spot, threw himself down on his blanket. Lighting a cigarette, by means of flint and tinder, he stretched himself out at full length, with his saddle for a pillow.

"I say," said Devlin, inspired by a sudden thought; "I reckon, as this trail runs to Altar, there's a chance for a traveler now and then."

"Well?"

"Well, in case any should come along it's not necessary to tell 'em where we're bound for. It's just as well not to go with a rush, and men are such infernal idiots, they'd just go off in a swarm if they knew what we were up to. You understand?"

"I should smile," answered Darringer.

Then the two conversed a while longer in a low tone of Eden City, the mysterious camp in the desert, and the road of peril before them, until, at last, drowsiness overtook them, their words came slower and lower, and finally they were both away through the portal to the world of dreams.

No other pair would have dared as much, and it was not through any ignorance of the dangers that lurked around, but through sheer carelessness as to what might happen. Walter Devlin really cared but little what became of him, and as for Dave Darringer, his life spoke for itself.

Besides, they had faith in themselves, and a clear knowledge of what they could do; so that what might be excess of foolhardiness in others was not so much a mistake in them.

About midnight the two men were wide awake, as though suddenly moved by a galvanic battery. The mustang of Walter Devlin had given a snort—it might be of surprise, or it might be of warning. Somebody or something was coming near.

"Travelers, by mighty! Didn't I told you so?" exclaimed Devlin, listening to the distant sounds on the trail. "Wheels, moreover; some one on the road to Altar. Special coach with a load of rocks, and like as not they'll lay up here for a rest. If you've got anything to say drop it out quick; there's not much time to fool about it."

"What in the name of creation have I got to say? Let 'em halt or go by—it's allee samee to me."

"And what's all that?"

Devlin pointed to the hither side of the bend in the trail.

From the shadow of the rock before mentioned, they saw three dark, sinuous forms slinking out, planting themselves right in the center of the faint track, where they remained motionless and waiting.

"The kittens again! By the holy heaven! they're up to some dodge. The beasts can't have got hungry. It's going to be no end of a row, and I'll back 'em, two to one."

"You're sure you ain't going to take a hand in the mix yourself; because, if you're going to back their game, cue me if I don't put up for the travelers. Fa' play is a jewel, and I'm half dead for fun."

As Devlin spoke he peered curiously and suspiciously through the darkness at his vis-a-vis.

"Back whatever game you want. I'm hold-



ing out until we get to Eden City. Only, I'd observe, that the border between Mexico and Arizona is an unhealthy place to air suspicions, and it's just as well to have them very solid before you begin to shout them off. If you hold on a bit you'll have a chance to see what they amount to."

There was a warning in these words that Devlin understood; and he accepted it without anger. He deserved it if his suspicions were false; and if they were true, it was a mistake to ventilate them until he had the proof. He waited, watching; and his companion did the same.

The wheels came nearer and nearer. This was no stage route; but vehicles, coming from the north, some in places when well guarded, took the chances and struck the trail that here ran in a southeasterly direction, along the foothills, finally losing itself in the broader, better defined one that led through Las Playas to Altar.

That such was the route the approaching conveyance was about to take was the thought of Devlin; who also considered that probably the travelers would be alive to the dangers of the road, and in a measure ready for the surprise that, no doubt, was in store for them.

So, with amused eagerness he watched the three crouching figures, satisfied that he was nearing the solution of a mystery of which he had heard; but, hitherto, with unbelief.

Around the bend an invisible whip sounded, with a sharp crack, the rattle and grind of the wheels rose louder on the night air, and he heard the cheerful voice of the driver as he urged the lagging team to keep ahead of the rolling wheels.

Then the four horses came into sight, with a swaying coach behind them; and then—with an angry snarl the three lions arose in the path, and gave, each, a short bound forward, while from the darkness at the side of the rock came the hoarse, savage cry:

"Halt, and hands up! Stir a step and teeth and pills commence to work!"

From the coach arose a shout; the brake went down with a bang; while the driver threw himself back in a long, desperate pull upon his plunging horses.

There was no longer any room for doubt. This was a road-agent's ambush, and the plunder was about to begin.

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### A NEW DEAL.

It was light enough for all parties concerned to get a fair view of what was going on.

Devlin could see that two or three anxious faces looked out from the coach—for such the vehicle was.

The road-agent seemed to be one and alone.

After his challenge he stepped forward, a revolver in either hand, while two of the tigers, at a low whistle, bounded to his side.

The presence of the beasts had a terrifying effect.

The passengers, who had heard them, and now had a chance to see them in unpleasantly close proximity, seemed more horrified than they would have been at a score of men, while the horses plunged wildly and were only held by a firm pair of hands on the lines and a stout brake on the wheels.

"I reckon there won't be no foolishness hyer," said the agent, as he appeared right at the window of the coach. "It would be a mighty bad thing for some one if there was. There's a regiment of sich beauties ez these, with the'r teeth all sharpened ter begin, an' I'm all that's standin' between 'em an' you. Jist drop out ther usual contribushun, an' then move on."

The coach contained a number of passengers—in fact, there were a round half-dozen.

At the cool proposition a chorus of shouts arose, but no one made any movement toward responding. If Mr. Devlin was not mistaken in the sounds wafted to him on the night air, there was, moreover, a woman in the party.

He glanced around at Darringer, but that worthy was standing perfectly unmoved, though undoubtedly curious as to what would be the upshot of this strange affair.

It was a curious position for the two spectators if they were honest men, though probably they did not think it worth their while to interfere. What was a coach to them? If the passengers gave up any considerable portion of their money—as they undoubtedly would—they would go on their way rejoicing that the adventure had not been more serious.

Notwithstanding the appeal, the rain of contributions did not begin.

On the contrary, from the coach there came a sudden flash, followed by a sharp, quick report. In spite of threat and danger, some one had taken a shot at the road-agent.

"Heavens!" said Devlin, in a low tone. "He has it!"

And then he drew out his flint and a cigarette and struck a light.

The road-agent, at the report, partly threw up his arms and staggered backward, as though hard hit, yet it was nothing. Only for a few seconds was he demoralized, and those were the seconds that Walter Devlin had consumed in lighting his cigarette.

Recovering himself, the outlaw suddenly stooped, and snatching up one of his pets, flung it upon the coach. Then through a window he cast the other. He followed up this movement by bounding forward and throwing open the door of the vehicle, which he entered.

From inside the cries and yells now arose with redoubled energy.

There seemed to be no more thought of any resistance, and the state of affairs quickened the pulses even of reckless Devlin.

"I think we'll have to look into this a little," he said, removing the smoking roll from his lips.

"Any way at all," answered Darringer. "There's no money in it, but it will pan out lots of fun. Come. We'll have a little talk with this mysterious stranger ourselves. I reckon you can draw and pull as quick as any of them. I generally shoot from my pockets."

"Don't be alarmed about me. I can keep my corner level till the time comes to drop it. Here goes."

The two strolled carelessly forward.

"Hello, here!" said Devlin, as they stood in front of the coach. "What's going on here? This thing seems to be no end of a row, and it's about time we knew what it's all about."

As he spoke the road-agent leaped out, dragging with him two of the passengers, one of whom he held by the throat in either hand. When he struck the ground he became aware for the first time of the disturbing element that had come upon the scene of action.

Darringer was standing with his arms folded; while Devlin was nonchalantly nibbling at the end of his cigarette. If they intended interfering in so dangerous an affair the two went very coolly about it.

That very circumstance produced a stunning effect upon the robber, who stood for a few seconds as if transfixed, his gripe upon the two captives involuntarily tightening until he was recalled to himself by feeling them collapse in his hands, hanging there like dead weights. When he loosened his hold they dropped to the ground, and lay in two little, motionless heaps.

It was not certain that, for them at least, the interference had not proved disastrous.

"I wouldn't move if I were you," said Darringer, whose hands had dropped easily into his pockets. "This sort of thing has been going on long enough, as my friend suggests. If this court knows herself, as she thinks she does, she's got the dead medicine on you, and she'll keep the advantage if it spoils her coat. Would it be asking too much to request you to hold up your hands? If you don't, well, I should smile."

Mr. Darringer did not announce what it was at which he should smile; but he enforced his words with a movement of his hands, which were still hidden in the depths of his side pockets; and a more inexperienced man than the discomfited road-agent could have understood the gesture. Darringer had the drop.

"So we've struck Panther Bill," suggested Devlin.

"Good enough! I've heard of him before, and thought it was all chin-chin. It does a man good to find that there's some truth in the world. Don't you move now, or we'll drill you. I reckon the best plan would be to go through you for all your worth, and turn you loose. I swear I've got no use for you, but we'll have a good squint though. It's worth a hundred mile ride to say you've seen the boss of all agents."

Devlin spoke with a rasping mockery in his voice that was hard to bear. For all his careless words he was looking sharply at the man who appeared to be their prisoner.

The moonlight, if anything, had grown more brilliant, and the man, as he faced them, stood full in its glare. They could see what Panther Bill, as he had been called, looked like, and the sight was not an encouraging one, even though a spectator might know that the man was covered by two pistols in the pockets of Dave Darringer.

He was little less than a giant in stature, a Hercules in build, and though his face was masked, it seemed as though one could see it in its savage sternness, for all. Two eyes glittered like a pair of coals, and watched, through the eyelet-holes, for the shadow, even, of a chance.

From one to the other the man looked, but still he remained silent.

"Come, speak out, man. We struck in to spoil your little game, and we have you foul."

For answer Panther Bill, without moving a muscle, or opening his lips, uttered a low whistle, made by drawing the air in between his teeth.

It was a signal, and the three panthers heard it. A trio of growls were heard; and the animal on top of the coach put its paw up on the shoulder of the driver, who, already half paralyzed by fright, sunk down in his seat. If the horses had not been by this time in much the same condition, they might have wrecked the coach at will, since their heads were free, and the attention of every one was occupied with the little bit of melodrama at the side.

The panther that was still within the stage answered its mate above, while the third brute, which lay in the middle of the trail, in front of

the horses, opening its jaws, gave utterance to a sharp, short whine.

Whether they misunderstood their orders, or were not inclined to obey, no help did the panther-tamer receive from his aid.

"I wouldn't try it again," continued Darringer. "We've scratched up an acquaintance with the anamiles, and Jack is likely to be as good as his master. Come! what have you got to say for yourself? First, though, call your pets down and out. They might make some mistakes there, and if our ears didn't deceive us, there is some calico there that needs a little more careful handling than the general run of south-bound pilgrims."

Panther Bill snapped his thumb and finger at the order and this time he was at least partly obeyed. The animal in front arose and walked lazily to his side; the one whose paw had been resting on the driver sprang down and took his station, only the third refused to move, and still remained hidden in the recesses of the coach, from which there came the sound of a little struggle, followed by a short, girlish laugh.

Outsprung a figure that was undoubtedly female, though clad in a nondescript sort of costume. It was Gertie of the Gulch, who, the night before, had met Edna Wheeler just after Walter Devlin had turned away.

She did not seem the least alarmed, since, holding the panther by the jaw, she dragged it out only half willing to come.

"Of all tin-pot games ever invented, this I think, is the smallest. So you thought you and your gang could go through a coach that carried Gertie? Not very much. It is clean the other way. Half a cent would make me blow your worthless skull open. You've terrorized the roads long enough—it is time that something was done. What is it to be?"

At the sound of the girl's voice the outlaw lost the semblance of fear, though he may have been surprised. He wheeled suddenly and stood looking and listening, hearing her through to the end.

"You hyer?" he growled. "Ah, yer hev got inter ther wrong box; an' ef this war a put-up job it will cost yer dear. Panther Bill may be down on his luck; but he bez ther pards around ez kin see him through. Up with your hands gal, er it'll be all ther wuss. We hev yer caged at last."

There was a touch of triumph in his voice, and he gave a spring toward the girl, with outstretched hand; but she eluded him, leaping lightly to one side.

Then from the outlaw's lips rose a shrill whistle; then there was a sharp rattle near by, as if from the cocking of half a dozen carbines, and a hoarse voice, hitherto unheard, shouting:

"Hands up er take yer dose ov lead pills!"

Then there was the crack of a whip—ounding little less loud than the report of a pistol, and the coach sped suddenly away, with Gertie swinging on the step, while Devlin and his newly made friend stood surrounded by half a dozen or more dark forms that had suddenly leaped out from the shadows.

### CHAPTER XIV.

#### TOM GOUGER MEETS HIS MATCH.

THE coach kept on down the trail, the horses going at a stretching gallop. At the very crisis of the affair the driver had seen his chance and brought down his whip in one sharp, sweeping cut, that had touched every animal in his team.

The road was tolerably even, but the pace was so rapid that the passengers inside received such a shaking up as they had never done before, while Gertie, poised on the step, clung to the standards on either side of the door, and only kept her place by an exertion that taxed her strength to the utmost.

A mile of this sort of work took the ambition out of the steeds, and as no sign of pursuit was to be seen, the gallop subsided into a steady trot; and it required some urging to maintain even that.

Gertie of the Gulch, when the rate of progress had somewhat moderated, clambered actively up to the top of the coach, and kept her face turned toward the spot from whence they had come, while a frown was on her handsome face. The desertion of Walter Devlin and his companion was not in accordance with her nature, but she had her reasons.

If she anxiously listened to catch the sound of any conflict that might ensue, she heard nothing.

Meantime, within, the passengers, who had at first crouched together in the sympathy of a mutual danger, and remained as mute as though lightning struck, began at last to breathe freer. When their voices could be heard above the rattle and rush of the wheels there was some discussion as to the late danger and escape, and the best course to take.

There had been five insides besides Gertie, and it was something of a mystery that, among them all, no more obstinate resistance had been offered than the one unsuccessful shot.

Four had looked like men who would not tamely submit to being robbed of their pos-



sions, yet it was the fifth, a youth of delicate frame and feature, who had made the effort.

At least this party looked like a youth in dress and action, and perhaps no one of the four men suspected anything else; but, as the seeming lad had entered the coach in company with the dashing Gertie, the reader will have no difficulty in understanding that Edna Wheeler was making her appearance under the false colors of an apt disguise.

She had seemed fairly at home in the garb, had talked freely with Gertie, and had paid some little attention to her other fellow-travelers, though coldly keeping them at a distance—as they did not seem to be of the class with which she would care to fraternize. They were of the ruder stamp, three of them looking like the mining men they professed to be, and apparently strangers to each other.

They had each endeavored to glean from the others some information as to destination and intentions; and all had talked vaguely of mining in the Southern country, though no one had vouchsafed any positive statement of how far he was going on with the stage.

The fifth man, who had spoken least of all, seemed to be of medium height, with a stoop in his shoulders, sallow complexion, black hair, piercing black eyes, and a prominent, aquiline nose. He was the only one of the travelers that had any amount of baggage, and Edna imagined that he was bent on a mercantile venture of some kind. His manner was nothing like as boisterous as that of some of the rest, though, from the way his sharp eyes met hers, from time to time, she had been satisfied that he was every whit as curious.

And this had been one of the men dragged from the coach by Panther Bill.

The other happened to be the most reserved in speech of his set, and the one who had made the least show of excitement during the first moments of the attack.

These two men, also, were left behind, at the mercy of the road-agents.

At first no one raised an objection; but, as the miles dropped behind, with no appearance of pursuit or danger, there was an accession of courage, and the two men, after some excited talk among themselves, began to raise their voices.

"Hyar, Jimuel," exclaimed one, thrusting his head out, and craning his neck up for a good look at the driver, "you've lost part o' yer load, an' we'd better hold on till we figger up ther square thing ter be did. Durned ef it don't go ag'in' ther wool ter leave white men ter be chawed up by contankerous painters er owdacious cutthroats. Hole on a bit, will yer?"

The driver, whose name was Jim Stoner, accepted the elongation of Jimuel, but not the advice. He shook the lines to keep up the pace, and leaned over:

"I hauled in fer ter give yer all er chance ter make yer game. Now ther ball's a-rollin', an' ther chances are over. Hold on ter yer stamps till ther next set up. G'lang!"

"Hang it all!" shouted the other man, thrusting his head out of the window on the opposite side, "what d'you mean, drivin' on like that, when ther doors war open, an' I, Tom Gouger, ther dead shot ov Shasta, war about ter tune up ther band fur ther cirkiss ter begin. Why, in jist three seconds more you'd 'a' see'd sich slaughter ez ther never hed been on this hyer trail. I'm orful death when I do cut loose. You hear me, eh? Haul in a bit while we talk it over."

"I ain't no time ter haul in; but if yer wants ter tackle ther Panther Boss, an' all his gang, it don't need no talkin'. We'll jist turn an' go back. Hyer yer be. Whoop la! We'll take some of that 'ere slaughter; an' it won't be long afore it begins. Look out in thar that ther hearse don't tip over an' bu'st ye all wide open!"

Still at a trot, the driver executed a wheel that brought his horses' heads in the direction of the spot which they had lately left, and took up the rear movement at as rapid a gait almost as he had held when fleeing from danger.

Gertie of the Gulch heard all this, but she did not offer interference or suggestion. When the coach had wheeled she simply turned. Perhaps she would have been willing to go back.

Tom Gouger and his companion were not. They yelled at Jim Stoner like mad; and for answer he used the silk and managed to get up a fair speed, much as he had taken out of his team. If he was not fully bent on making his words good, his actions were a most successful sham.

"Blame yer cats, yer crazy as a treed cinnamon! Ye'll hev us all in the ditch. Ther last time—are yer goin' ter stop? Ef yer don't, I'll salt yer down with ther cold lead. Brakes down or I'll plug yer!"

With a flourish Gouger swung out the nine-inch navy that he had carefully allowed to rest in his belt while the agent was around and there was present danger to face. Then he leaned well out of the window and aimed at Jim Stoner, who, with voice and whip, was madly encouraging on his team.

"You kiver him from ther other side, pard, so ther can't be no dodgin', an' we'll bring him.

Ef he don't slam down the brakes when I shout let him have it."

"All right. Them's my hand too. Ef we konker I reckon we git ther sp'les, an' that are O. K. Out she are."

And from the window on the opposite side leaned the other, trying to get an aim with the revolver that he held in his left hand.

"We got yer kivered, Jimuel. Hold up yer drop when I count three. Ready, pard! One—two—"

"And I, wretches, have you covered! Drop those weapons that you hold, to the ground, or die! One—two—"

Between the two leaned Edna, with outstretched hands, each one pressing to an ear the muzzle of a revolver, and her voice was sharp and firm, like one who would admit of no trifling, but would do exactly what her words indicated.

"Hold on; I cave!" exclaimed Gouger.

Brave or coward as he might be, he was quick enough to know when the drop was on him.

But he still held fast to his weapon.

"Drop your irons, then, or I'll fire. You are up to some plot and you are worse than the road-agents. I don't want to slay you; but your teeth must be drawn or you die!"

If Edna was in earnest—as she certainly was—no possible chance was there for the two men to escape death at her hands if they attempted resistance. Their only chance would be to drop their weapons now, and trust to being able in time, to seize some advantage by which they might profit.

But meantime the horses were taking them straight back toward the road agents, who, in turn, doubtless were hurrying to meet them.

To Mr. Gouger the time seemed unfavorable for opening his circus; and his ally was of the same opinion.

There was one way of compromise which Edna had not thought of—and they took it, simultaneously though without consultation.

On either side the door flew open, and without stopping to pick soft places the two flung themselves out, revolvers in hand.

They dropped heavily, yet without serious damage. Gouger turned at least three summersets before becoming stationary, while the other man, though the shock was not of the nature to produce concussion of the brain, did not arise from his sitting posture for some seconds after the coach had vanished from sight.

Jim Stoner had no intention of hunting Panther Bill and his gang, though he kept up his retrograde movement for half a mile.

Then he turned sharply to the left, while Gertie, after a word or two with him, let herself down over the side, holding to the top rail, and swung lightly inside.

"Ha, ha, my dear," she said. "We are well rid of that gang; but what was Walter Devlin doing there?"

## CHAPTER XV.

### A DRAWN GAME.

MR. DEVLIN and his partner had no desire, specially, to pass in their checks, or precipitate a general engagement in which the odds were so greatly on the other side.

On the other hand, they did not mean to give away a chance, or throw up the game before the last card was played. Their preference was for a new deal; but if that could not be had, then a bold stand. Devlin's hands were out, garnished each with a six-shooter; and Dane Darringer's coat-tails had assumed a line horizontal. Panther Bill was covered, and so was a trio of his aids; but, in turn, the muzzles of half a dozen carbines and a brace of pistols covered the pair.

Devlin chipped first.

"Your game is blocked, and there's nothing here for you but hard knocks and no coin. Draw off your m'n and light out or I swear ther'll be some vacancies, beginning with the captaincy. I mean it."

"And we mean somethin' else. D'yer think you two kin hold out agin' ther gang? Drop them irons er you'll go through ther hash-mill in a flash. A nice mess you've made. Drop 'em, curse yer, er I'll set ther beauties on yer!"

Panther Bill stepped forward a pace or two, and through the eyelet-holes in his mask his blazing optics seemed to shoot fire. Little mercy would he be apt to have for these marplots, but for whom the now receding stage would have been at his mercy.

But savage as were his tones he seemed unwilling to give the signal that would bring certain annihilation. Anger him though it might the cool effrontery of Walter Devlin had its effect.

Any movement on either side must bring certain death for some one; and Panther Bill had no men that he cared to spare. After all his murderous propensities he preferred to take his prisoners without a struggle if a little parleying would accomplish that object.

Devlin felt very much the same way, though he did not give an inch of ground.

"I'll drop them no doubt; but you'll tumble first. This is no bluff game; but a fair call on a

stronz hand, that's worth all the money I put on it. We can't stand out this way long; and blessed if I'm going to do it. If you're holding the edge I'll chip in."

"Then, down with him, boyees!"

The Panther Boss hissed out his words with fierce vehemence, and yet there was no answering movement from his men. At that instant there came a counter attack. Right in the face of them all a man leaped upon the chief, wrenched him from his feet by a sudden, powerful twist, and stood over him with a drawn bowie trembling above his breast.

The assailant was one of the two men that had been dragged from the stage, and however easily he had been handled then he was certainly doing wonderful work now. No one had given a thought to him or his comrade from the time they had dropped senseless from the grasp of the road-agent chief, and now he came with a vengeance.

"You hear me all? I war layin' back ter wait fer ther turn an' be caught me sleepin'; but I'm hyer now—I, Peaceable Pete. Down with yer hands, er I'll send this hyer blade clean home."

Devlin and his companion did not seem at all excited by the appearance of this unexpected aid; the rest were stupefied, especially when they heard Dane Darringer's easy drawl:

"I should opine that we have you fowl. I'll assist; and we hold all the trumps between us. The man that turns a six toward that rooster dies. If you try to plug me first an election for a new captain is next in order. We're only four to seven, but that's not big odds; and you'll think there's at least a million when you hear me shoot."

Darringer's statement was clearly the truth.

"Say, Cap, what shell we do?"

One of the road agents ventured the question, since everything had come to such a dead block.

"Ef you'd done without askin' yer might have saved trouble. Now I ain't sich a dong-blasted hog ez not ter know when my stummik's full. Ef they'll quit, we'll draw out. We've got bizness somewhar's else."

The man made a proposition that no one cared to reject.

Devlin did not hesitate.

"Our track lies along down that trail," he said, pointing in the direction in which the coach had vanished. "You can scatter to any of the other points of the compass, and when we get rested we'll light out. I suppose there'll be blood in the moon until we meet again, but I can't help that. It will be time enough then to figure up who is to drop. If you're going, go at once!"

"That's sound!" answered Panther Bill, with deadly coolness, "and I'll recomember it when I draw a bead on yer. Good night."

"Thanks; it's not a very good night for road-agents, but it's the best we have."

Without noticing the unwholesome jest, the road-agent gave a motion and the gang withdrew. They all cast watchful glances as they went, but Mr. Devlin had turned to the three men, who were behind his game, as carelessly as though there was no danger of a shot from behind.

Peaceable Pete, now that the deal had resulted in their favor, looked in no pleasant mood.

"You've done it, strangers, an' I'm in yer boat fur a steerage passenger in ther ding-blasted, dangersomest v'yage ever invented. I ain't no kiote, but I war a holdin' out when I seen it war Panther Bill ez dealt ther cards. I've hed ther chances more nor once ter buck ag'in' his game; but you chaps hev did it, an' I'll hev ter back yer hand fur all I'm worth, an' then, mebbe, lose my pile."

"Don't get excited," interposed Mr. Devlin, calmly. "It strikes me that there are four of us, and back to back we ought to hold our own. Who is Panther Bill that we must sing small when he howls?"

"I opine you're a stranger ter these regions ur yer wouldn't ask no sich a fool question. Ef ther war ary answer it wouldn't be so bad; but yer don't know who he are until after he hits yer, an' then it ain't no use. One time an' another ther's noomerous galoots foned his line, an' when he didn't take 'em in ou ther spot, somethin' happened to 'em shortly. 'Thout knowin' much about him, ther's a record ov 'bout thirty reckoned up ag'in' him, an' ther most on 'em war good men."

"That's the kind of men I like to meet," remarked Darringer, as he saw a chance to slip a word in edgeways. "No nonsense, and a sure show for fun. But just now the question is, what are we going to do? While we're sitting around here, the gang will be laying back for us or pelting on after the hearse. We've got to be ready to block either game, or both."

"No use to cross the bridge till we get to the river. There's a little woman in that cargo that looks as though she could take care of herself and all the crowd."

"But there's a couple mighty bad galoots thar, that wouldn't stop at anything, murder an' all. They'd think they could take in calico; an' when they got started they couldn't stop till they pulled trigger. You kin lay off hyar;



but I'm a-goin' right on. Ef yer light on my corpus in yer travels count one more ag'in' Panther Bill."

## CHAPTER XVI.

BARNABAS KAIN.

"SEE here," interposed Mr. Devlin. "Last night you and I had some words, and I set you down as a fraud; but you're talking square from the hub now. If you mean it to stay, and are going to forget all that foolishness, I'm willing to count you in on the ground floor. I reckon we're all bound for Eden City—if there is such a place—and we may as well go there together."

"Put it thar, pard," said Pete, extending his hand, without a moment's hesitation. "That's the level we're workin' on, an' it'll do me proud ter go inter the Valley ov Rest in sich company. Ef we don't take ther cake ther won't be no fair show at the walk."

"An' vot pecomsh ov me, shentlemen. I vas ov no account, to pe sure, put it vould p-werry loosesome all to meshelf, an' I vos dink you'se petter go 'longst mit me."

"Father Abraham, alive! And who may you be?" inquired Dane Darringer, as nearly startled by the apparition as it was well possible for him to be.

"I vosh a man mit ter paggage, vot sharters der goach. I don't wants ter vite, er do anydings mit der road-agents, but only get to der Eden City, shoost so quick as ve can. My name is Barnabas Kain, und I knows der vay."

"Good enough!" exclaimed Devlin, heartily. "You're the man we were waiting for; but I swear you don't show to much advantage on the war path. What did you take it for?"

"I vos on buishness to der Poker Flat, und ven I heerd der sthories about ter Eden City I look a leedle oud, und I finds a pardy as vos bound der go, und va sharters der goach. It ish paid for by der cash down, but if I findsh him not again it breaksh me all up."

"But what's that got to do with knowing the way? Anybody can bear all they want at Walnut Bar or the Flat; but a man that starts on their say-so is a bigger fool than you look."

"Dot vash true, but I vos been dere, vonce long vile ago. It moost be der same place, an' I kin find der vay ag'in'."

"You're piling it up steep, old man. If you were there how did it come you left again? It can't be much of a bar or you'd have stuck to the lead until the bottom dropped out."

"It vosh doo hot—redt hot. Dree ov us make de riddle dere, und ve shoost look shquare 'round vonce und ve den light right oud on de ear. Dey vosh dook in on der roadt pack, und I vosh chased op und town py'te red teflis und py chance I sbtrike wasser efry dime."

Peaceable Pete had been watching and listening more closely, even, than the Two Cool Sports. He broke in now:

"Say, pards, don't yer trust him. Ther'ain't no two-legged gerloot ez spits out sich er lingo ez iz fit ter lead blind monkeys ter water. Thar ain't no man ez stamps these yer regions fur three year that I don't know er ain't heered on; but I ain't never heered on Barnabas Kain. No sree. He's bad medercine, an' we'd better fire him out."

"Oh, I know who he is fast enough," interposed Darringer. "He's a Welch Jew, and he's been in jail in Sacramento for a year for stabbing a Greaser in his sleep. I'm trying to his story, too; but what puzzles me is, how did he get out of jail and where did he make the raise? Financially he seems pretty well heeled. Never mind that, though; let's hear his story, if he wants to tell it. If it shows three colors to the pan we'll buy in on his claim. If you want us, clean out your breast, Sheeny, and see that you tell a straight story."

Barnabas listened in silence; but not with composure. While Darringer spoke he seemed full of a nervous dread; and it was only when he ceased speaking that he drew a sigh of relief.

"Dot vosh drue; und I tid kill der Mexican; but it vos bis life or mine. Some goot fr'endt help me oud, und I hafe von pile hidt away to shart vith. Ven I hears ov Eden City I shoumps right in."

"And how does it come that if there is such a place no one comes back? and have they all died that started for that camp? If they have, it's not a very lively little burg."

The conversation that ensued was somewhat extended, and it is not necessary to follow it word for word. Barnabas, however, explained very fully and clearly the difficulty, as it seemed to him.

Parties might have reached the place just after the spring rains, when it was possible to journey in a direct line. One man or more might have been sent for supplies when they struck it rich, and he might have given away, in part at least, the secret to men who might even have got into Eden City, as in some way it had got to be called; but after the dry weather commenced it would be impossible to cross the desert, except by the circuitous route which he, Kain, alone, and that by chance, had learned. When winter came, the world at large might perhaps find the spot; but before that any attempt would only end in death in the desert, by thirst or at

the hands of the Indian warriors that prowled around. It was pretty certain, to his mind, that the party was there yet, and with untold bullion at their disposal, out of which he proposed to turn a very pretty penny, if he succeeded in the apparently hopeless task of getting through. He had not intended to give his secret away; but it began to look as though he needed just three such men to back his game, both on the way and at Eden City.

That was the story he told, and when he got through Mr. Devlin remarked mildly:

"It appears to me you've forgotten the young ladies in this marvelous yarn you have been spinning. If you expected to take them along without their seeing pretty clearly where they were going, you've got less knowledge of the sex than a man of your age ought to have."

"They vospardt ov der paggage," answered Barnabas. "Pesides, dey bay vell, und—vell, idt make no diffruns."

"You're an infernal scoundrel, Mr. Kain, and I wouldn't trust you worth a cent; but we're bound for Eden City, and you may as well hit the trail as any other man, and I guess you can't lead us into any scrape that we can't get out of. If you're ready to do a little tall walking, gather yourself, for it's time we began to look after that baggage of yours. If you do take us into Eden City, I'll swear you sha'n't suffer for it—as long as we find you on the square. If you try any gouge games—stand from under."

"And I promise to back you up so long as you do not betray me or mine. When you do, in one way or another I will kill you, and don't you forget it."

To Dane Darringer's warning and Mr. Devlin's threat, Peaceable Pete added a word or two of his own.

"An' I swar', ef yer go back on us er ther paggage, ter send fourteen inches er steel plum thru' yer nozzle, an' pin yer up ter dry. Now kin on. You an' I hev twenty mile ter walk afore mornin', ef we don't strike ther hearse. I ain't takin' much stock in yer; but ye'll find me solid till yer stack ther keards. Then, ternal airthquakes, look out! I'll mash yer, sure."

Barnabas Kain had shown no very great courage before the road-agents; but the consecutive threats did not move him. He even laughed.

"He, he!" he said. "Ven Barnabas Kain passes in checks you vind all both dree off you tead doo. Now come on, Peaceable Pete. Ve go off togodder."

So the strange league was formed, on a basis of distrust, and the four men moved away, first to search for the coach, secondly to look for its missing passengers, and thirdly to track the long trail that led to Eden City.

## CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE ROAD TO EDEN CITY.

GERTIE of the Gulch was not proceeding without certain aim. On the contrary she had an objective point in view, and so soon as she was able safely to do so, she moved toward it.

"Be easy, my dear," she said, with a smile, to her protegee.

"We have lost our guide for the present, but it is very likely we will see him a ain. If we do not, he has not been under my blandishments for nothing. What he could tell of the route before us he has told; and though it is not a very comfortable thing to do, I think, with Stoner's assistance, we can get along very well without him."

"But the man will be killed. I cannot say that I liked him, yet, false and treacherous at heart as he may have been, I would not leave him in his danger without an effort to learn his fate, and that I am inclined to suspect will be the worst imaginable."

"Do not be alarmed about Barnabas Kain. I know something of the man, or think I do, and he is very well able to take care of himself. Then he is not alone. Did you not see the men that came to the rescue? Ah, they were men in a million. They are pledged to his defense now that they are on his side of the game. Be easy, then. We are well rid of him. We will find Eden City, and when Mr. Kain comes in we can turn over to him what worldly possessions we have of his, and he can go on his way rejoicing."

"And those men? Who are they? It is not the first time that I met one of them. He cautioned me, guarded me, and gave me wise counsel; yet all the time I doubted him. He has magnificent courage, at least. If I did not fear him as an enemy, I might care for him as a friend."

Gertie looked at the girl closely before she answered.

"Be careful how you give your friendship. There are few men that can be trusted, and here, of all places, mistakes are dangerous. You may be cherishing an enemy in disguise."

"Are you one?"

It was a shrewd question, even if there was little chance for an honest answer. Gertie heard it with evident trouble.

She shrugged her shoulders and leaned forward, peering full into the face of her companion.

"Perhaps I am; perhaps not. It will take time to learn. If I am your friend, you will find me truer than steel. If I am your enemy, I will let you know it before I strike. Then beware, for I will be the foe of foes, and utterly without mercy. But why should you care? You wanted to go to Eden City; and that far at least I will be your faithful guide. If I fail you it will be at my own cost."

Very much such a compact was this as that made by Mr. Devlin and Dane Darringer; for Edna Wheeler at this dubious offer stretched out her hand.

"You are frank, and I like frankness. I come of such a family. I would sooner have you speak so than to protest ever so strongly that you were my friend. I feel that I can rely on you, and I shall ask no further confidences. We have our reasons; and no doubt they are important enough. Very well. We will go to Ed n City if we can get there. Then, do as you choose. If I do not find those I search for I care not what comes."

"But I do," interposed Gertie, with sudden fierceness. "I know my history for a time; but back of it I scent a mystery. I go to find, to warn and to learn the truth. If I find more than I bargain for I may be going for revenge. And it may be we both go on the same errand."

Then, after this outburst, in silence these two, drawn toward each other yet repelled, listened to the rattle and grind of the wheels, while Jim Stoner urged on his horses.

When some hours had passed Gertie began to look anxiously around.

"You are sure you followed the course as I gave it to you?" she called to Stoner, and that worthy answered promptly:

"You kin jist gamble yer last foundation pick'yune on that thare. This are a blind with me lonely dollar, an' if some one doubles ther pot blamed ef I see bow I'm ter make her good. I want ter steal ther antes an' make a new deal."

The driver's illustration was hardly apt; but it was intelligible to Gertie, who laughed lightly.

"I wouldn't have you for a partner at the tables; but you're just the kind of a man I want here. Mind! You will be in some danger; but follow my lead, and I can almost guarantee that you will come out safe and the better off. But don't attempt any foolishness until I give the word. It's not every man with a pistol in his hands that is an enemy. And when the drop is on you throw up your hands."

"In course. I've drove stage long enough to know that. But where yer bound fur now?"

"Don't try to know too much, and you'll take things better when they come. Be silent and go on. I think I see my way better now."

Stoner accepted the caution and asked no further questions, while Edna, knowing still less than he, seemed the least concerned of the three.

The ground had changed, somewhat, in its nature, already. If present indications were not strangely unreliable it was pretty sure that they would not go much further in the vehicle. It took careful driving to advance without mishap, and before them the mountains loomed larger than ever.

"Halt!" suddenly exclaimed Gertie, and she sprung lightly out of the stage as Stoner threw down his break and took a steady pull on his lines. For some reason, hardly known, he did not care to open his mouth.

And then, as Gertie's feet touched the ground, out from the shadows stepped a man, with a leveled pistol in either hand. One weapon was turned on the driver, while the other was held full and fair on the dashing girl, who met the menace with a careless laugh.

"Well, Ephraim, I'm here, and I don't suppose that you are just going to slaughter me on sight. If you are, say the word and I'll get ready for the great inevitable."

The careless laugh, and the still more careless words, had a wonderful effect.

Down from the hands of the man dropped the weapons, while he fell upon his knees in front of the girl.

From the window of the stage Edna was watching, with her own revolver poised in a deadly line; for she had had no warning of what might come.

Even now she shuddered at the strange, weird features that were revealed in the moon light—the low forehead, gleaming eyes, white teeth, and square jaws, whose contour was only half-hidden by the thin beard.

It was hard, indeed, to tell the meaning of the scene, for this strange being was roaring out what sounded more like some strange gibberish, mixed with the howls of a wild beast, than any conceivable language.

Yet meaning the sounds had, whether they were of threat, prayer or welcome; and Gertie of the gulch seemed to understand them.

When the voice ceased with an angry roar, she answered in kind, though her tones were softer, and not altogether unmusical.

Then the strange being sprung to his feet, regaining his weapons as he did so; and gazed



eagerly at the stage as if to see who else might be visitors.

His eyes fell first upon the face of Edna, and he took a step or two forward.

She did not cower back as might have been expected. Uncertain though she was of the meaning of the scene she still remembered the warnings that had been given her by Gertie; and manifested no signs of either surprise, or fear, now that she had had a little time to steady her nerves.

Gertie was watching.

"You see I have my resources, even here. Gertie of the Gulch has not her name for nothing. I know many strange things; and the strangest of them all is Ephraim. He is my very obedient friend, as you may observe; but it remains to be seen whether my friends are his. I think you can trust him. Hop down, and you, Stoner, turn loose your horses. We sit here awhile."

Edna did not hesitate; though it seemed to her she could read an unfriendly as well as a ferocious look on the face before her. She sprang to the ground, and advanced toward the pair.

Again she heard the strangemedley of sounds, and again Gertie laughed.

"Ephraim has eyes as sharp as they make them. He has already penetrated your disguise, which was more than the blunderheads in the stage did. He was inclined at first to be jealous; now he wants to know if you are my sister."

"Can he understand me if I speak to him?"

"Perhaps—and perhaps not. We have a dialect of our own, with Tonto Apache for the groundwork. It's not worth while for you to undertake to master it. I had better do the talking for both. Stoner seems to have finished his work, and we may as well go in for the rest we need. I'll vouch for it that nothing disturbs his team while it's grazing on that pasture ground. Come."

The words were addressed to the driver as well. She made a motion which Ephraim evidently understood, for he led the way with his silent but slouching, ungainly stride.

Edna could easily imagine that they were about to enter some mountain retreat; nor was she disappointed.

A way opened out before them—a path that led upward.

When they had followed this for a few hundred yards they came to a little, low cabin, stoutly built, and placed squarely against the rock that hung high overhead.

Light gleamed through the chinks, and feet could be heard moving about within.

As they reached the threshold the door flew open and a strange form appeared.

The figure was bent, distorted, misshapen, yet evidently that of a woman.

Ephraim was leading the way. At sight of him the woman fell back, leaving a way for the four, of whom Stoner brought up the rear, and next to him came Edna.

The moment the latter entered, the woman gave a cry—it might be of surprise, or of something else—and springing forward she caught Edna's wrists with a cruelly powerful gripe. Then she burst into a wild, mocking laugh, and without a word began forcing the girl backward toward the rear of the cabin.

Edna preserved her coolness, though she felt herself utterly powerless in the grasp of what seemed to her to be a madwoman. She looked up at Gertie, but that strange girl stood with folded arms, watching, with some interest but no concern. At the rear wall there was an opening evidently, and in another instant the two would have disappeared.

Just then Gertie, turning to the young man, raised her hand and uttered a few words in the strange jargon she had already used.

Ephraim listened, heard, and obeyed. He caught the woman by the elbow, uttering a half-articulate cry, and at the sounds her gripe loosened and she stepped back.

For a moment there was silence in the little cabin.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### TROUBLE FOR TWO.

MR. DEVLIN and Mr. Devlin's followers found here and there the marks of a wheel and the prints of hoofs, but though for some time following in a general way the direction taken by the stage, they finally lost the trail altogether, and after having passed what seemed to be sufficient distance between them and the spot where they had parted from the discomfited road-agents, they camped for the unexpended balance of the night.

This camp was the first test of Barnabas Kain's knowledge of the trail, and it proved him to be no bad guide.

"Toss you a copper, Darringer, to see who sleeps first—you and Pete, or Kain and I. It'll be watch and watch, and not very safe sleeping at that."

"That's von biece pisness vot preaks me all upsh. Sleep longer und not so mooch guard. Vat your man can't see; not mooch rest fur undt tozzen."

"Very true," responded Mr. Devlin. "It's

not so much Indians that need watching as Mr. Barnabas Kain. You might take a notion to ride one of the horses away on a little scout and forget to come back. So might I. I'm down on this thing of temptation. I've been there myself; and I want somebody around to hold me straight. You sabbe?"

Barnabas Kain understood very well what was meant. Evidently they did not intend to trust him altogether, and conscious guilt sealed his mouth. He allowed the three to arrange everything, and the copper being duly tossed, in ten minutes thereafter was asleep and snoring.

He and Mr. Devlin had won the first rest.

It seemed like only a few moments later that he heard Dane Darringer's voice right at his ear:

"Time's up, my little lamb; turn out for guard mount."

"Shoost wait a pit. Dree minnits more, an' then callsh me ag'in."

And Barnabas turned over with the evident intention of taking another nap.

"Blamed if I do, though," said Darringer, with the nearest approach to a growl that had yet been heard from his lips. Heizing Barnabas by the feet he gav him a pull and a fling that landed him half a dozen feet away from the blanket, and as wide awake as he ever was in his life. "Now, you can just see what you make of that crowd over yonder. It's my opinion they're Apaches on the war path. I reckon they won't come in much before morning, and as Devlin is watching them, I can afford to take a snooze myself. Wake me up when the killing begins."

Then Darringer flung himself down on the lately vacated blanket, and drew himself up with reckless abandon.

If he was not asleep in half a minute, he got up a very perfect imitation.

Barnabas Kain stared at him in amazement.

Were his words only a jest? It seemed likely; but as he turned toward Devlin, he saw that that young gentl man was gazing out over the plain in a way that indicated that something had attracted his attention.

Then he too could see several dark, moving forms, coming slowly and with evident caution toward the spot. They might be Apaches; but more likely they were the reappearing road-agents.

Mr. Devlin appeared to be satisfied, at length. He brought out flint and tinder, and lighted his everlasting cigarette.

The act seemed a premium on rashness, and Kain, creeping nearer, gently remonstrated.

"Ah, you don't like it. All right. Darringer is asleep. Peaceable Pete's asleep; you go to sleep, too. If you wake up without your back hair it will be all the better for the sultry climate you'll land in. Don't bother—and don't try any nonsense. I'm running this guard mount, and I'll let you know when I want any suggestions. All you've got to do is to keep out of mischief. Just remember I've got an eye on you all the time, and if any trouble comes, I'll save you sure."

Perhaps Kain was not as concerned as he had appeared.

He said nothing further, and watched alternately the nearing forms and Mr. Devlin, who looked as though he was in a brow study.

Before long the sounds of approaching footsteps were distinctly audible. Two men were stumbling along toward the camp.

Then they heard a coarse, rasping voice:

"I tell yer, Huckleberry, it's right sorter 'round hyar whar we squattyvoo fur the night, an fill up fur ther mornin' trail. Dog-blast a woman anyhow. Ef yer hedn't let the woman take yer inter camp while I war foolin' with the driver, we'd be cayoortin along with four more good legs under us."

"Oh, dry up, Shaster; I guess she didn't hold over me 'er ix shot more than she did over you. She war spry enuf ter git ther dead medercine onder both on us, an' no ust er torkin'. She an' her pard kin ride them ar stage bosses ter kingdom glory; an' we'll jist hev ter foot it ter Eden City, onless we go back ter Cactus Fork an tries er new lay-out, an' er fresh game."

"Don't be sich er dog-blasted fool, Huckleberry. Ef they see us thar ag'in we'd hev ther hull camp taggin' on arter us. It's more ner er wonder they let us slip out ez it war, 'thout freezin' right onder ther hind boot ter see whar we war goin'. They heard yer talk at ther Fork, an' yer give ther whole game away."

"Who goes ther?" sung out Mr. Devlin, at this juncture.

The reader has probably recognized in the wanderers the two men whom Edna Wheeler had braved and discomfited a few hours before, and just subsequent to the escape from Panther Bill and his gang.

At this halt they stopped suddenly and were thoroughly silent.

"Speak up quick; I want to plug you both if it has to be done, and then I can turn in for a snooze!"

The two men had their revolvers out and were peering anxiously around; but Devlin and his friends were in the shadow. From the sound of the voice it was too late to run; and it was not certain there was anything to run for. Gouger temporized!

"Say, pard, we've got our hands up. We're squar' men, me an' Huckleberry ar', but we're down on our luck jist now, seein' ez how ther road-agents hez crawled right over us. Ef you be some ov Panther Bill's gang we ain't got er red cent, an' nothin' but our shootin'-irons. It ain't wuth while ter slaughter us fur them; an' ef you got any grub we w'u'dn't mind buokin' in with yer till mornin', an' then take er fresh start."

"No road-agents are there here; but a camp of honest miners, that have nouse for Huckleberry and Gouger. But come in if you want to, and we'll see what your story is worth. Keep your hands out of mischief though, for we shoot first and shout afterward, sometimes."

"Oh, you'll find us squar' ter tie to ef yer honest Injuns; but ef yer on any gum games, you'll find ther Death Shot ov Shaster 'round on nine wheels. Hyar we kin."

Barnabas Kain heard this conversation with interest. As the two men advanced he stepped forward:

"Py Moses! It's ter doo men mit der goach. Fare ist ter odders?"

"Why, hello, hyar's the Sheeny, with ther boot-load er luggage, and I reckon ther other missin' pilgrim's 'round. Good enuf; we're all friends in this hyar lay out."

"Speak for yourself," answered Devlin, coldly. "What has become of the coach?"

"An' der doogals?" interposed Barnabas, with some show of anxiety.

Devlin half turned, and looked at the speaker sharply.

"So yer dropped to ther leetle gal what sported ther onmenshunables! Yer ain't ser dumb ez yer looks. Blame my cats ef I did till ther last minnit."

"Der las' minnit what? Where ish der goach, an' phat vos der happens?"

Kain's eagerness was rising.

"Well, nothin' much. Ther dog-gonedest accident, 'bout 'mountin' ter much."

"Ther road galoots took us onawares, an' me an' Huckleberry hadn't got down to work fur fear ov gettin' ther purty leetle gal what goes by ther name ov Gertie inter trouble. When ther bosses run erway, me an' my pard wanted ter argy ther matter, 'cos we thort we orter come back an' see what become ov ther two ez war dropped, an' while we war talkin' it up ther stage give er swing, an' pitched me an' Huckleberry heels over end. Just then ther leetle cuss hove er yell, an' I knowed he war a gal. We tried ter foller ther coach on foot, but travelin' by moonlight are onartin', an' we lost 'em; so hyar we are, hoofin' it along on ther trail fur Eden City. That's ther full story."

"Put phare are they now? Mine paggage went mit der goach, an' der girlsh vos mine friends! Oh, Moses, but it ves awful if dey gets dook in."

"I guess they're hunkus dorus fur ther night, seein' ez how we trailed 'em right in to-wa'ds this hyar spot. In ther mornin' Huckleberry'll jist waltz right onto 'em, fur he's a boss trailer, now you jist bet."

"Then there are two young women adrift in the coach. I should have thought they would have kept straight on. Well, we'll make it all right in the morning, if the morning ever comes. I know you're more than half lying, and if your pard opened his mouth he would be altogether; but it does just as well as the truth. Now, dry up and go to sleep. We've got two more to watch, and the job ain't overly a nice one."

"See hyar, yer needn't put on side. We're peaceable roosters till yer rub our hackles ther wrong way. Then we're sartin death. Methe you've heard ov me, Tom Gouger, ther Death shot ov Shaster? an' Huckleberry thar! Ef he caught hold he'd shake ther stuffin' right outen yer. Sing er leetle smaller, my tulip, er ther aithquake'll begin."

Gouger ruffled up under the scornful ring of Devlin's voice. He thought he had the advantage; and he was villain enough to take it. His voice suddenly took on an anxious tone in spite of himself as he shouted:

"Go fur 'em, Huckleberry! I've got this one kivered."

Huckleberry's answer was a howl. At the moment his hands dropped to his belt he felt a pair of hands fall upon him from behind; and then up into the air he rose, hanging for an instant in the tremendous gripe of Peaceable Pete, who, the next moment, flung him full at Gouger.

Down went the two in a heap together, and Dane Darringer, who had had his eyes open for some minutes, remarked, as he slid his weapons back into his belt:

"You did that well, Peter. But if you'd held out a minute longer I would have had him plugged; which would have been the safer in the long run. They're a bad little pair."

"Py Moses, I would 'a' tried him minerself," interposed Barnabas Kain, who had a pistol half drawn.

"It wa'n't your chip, and if you know what's good for you, you won't be flourishing any fire-arms around here. They might point in the wrong direction; and if they did, for ever so little, there would be a dead Barnabas."

Mr. Devlin's warning seemed to have its



effect; but there was a savage gleam in the eyes of Kain as he turned away, that might have given even that thoughtless gentleman food for reflection had he seen it.

As for the two toughs, they staggered to their feet, looked around in a half-dazed sort of way, and then sat down sullenly, without another word.

To judge by their appearance, though they were, for the present, cowed, they would keep a bright lookout for a chance for mischief in the future.

"And now—"

What Mr. Devlin intended to say was lost in a long drawn cry that, muffled a little though it was by distance, came with startling distinctness to their ears.

Then there was a rush of footsteps, and after that all was silent.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### THE WEIRD WOMAN'S PETS.

The weird woman of the cabin seemed to be torn by conflicting emotions.

She looked from Gertie to Edna, and then back again.

"Yes, she is my friend, and I promised her safety here. Touch her if you care to; but if you do, you have henceforth a bitter foe in me."

For the first time in her conversation with these two strange recusers, Gertie spoke in words that were intelligible to Edna; and for the first time the answer was of the same nature.

"You bring that face here to me for safety? If I do not strike it down it is for your word. Do not trust me too far. Take her away—go yourself and hide her away. In a moment I may forget myself and slay her."

"And why should you do murder? The girl has done no harm to you; and I have agreed to take her with me to Eden City. Until she gets there she is my friend and companion; I am her guide and backer. If she is your enemy she is also mine; and yet I feel no hate for her. She has a mission, too; and for that reason I am drawn toward her. She has not given me her confidence; she has not asked me for mine. Let it be so. To night we will rest here; to-morrow you will be relieved of our presence. If you meet her again, work your will."

"Look at her!" answered the woman, pointing to Edna, who had stepped back a pace or two, and stood slightly tremulous, and yet as cool as one could well imagine under the circumstances.

"She is a spawn of the black blood—if girl she is. If she lives she will work more deadly harm to me and mine. The fates tell me so. Yet for your sake I must not kill her. Why should I give my life for you? Go! I turn you out. When we meet again I will slay, no matter when it may be."

"Fair payment, this, after the manner of the world. I gave life to you and Ephraim once; and now, like the wolf that you are, you threaten to turn and rend me. Very well, work your worst. From here we do not stir to-night. I know something of the dangers here; but I don't know what we might meet if we went stumbling further on, outside."

"Ah, you think you can cast in my teeth the favor you think you did me. What was my miserable life worth? If I had not bitter revenge to live for I would have slain myself long ago. Look at Ephraim. The sight of him gladdens a mother's heart, does it not? Better to have left us both to die when the pangs of death were already half over, than bring us back to the only life that I can live for the future. Ha! I have warned you for the last time; your own fault now, whatever happens."

She turned fiercely toward the rear of the cabin; and the light in her eye told that her mind was set on some desperate purpose.

There was none so blind there as not to see, and Jim Stoner gave a gasp as he fell back over the threshold. Forbidden to fight, he saw nothing to do but to retreat.

Ephraim had listened to the conversation, with a puzzled look on his face. Evidently he did not more than half understand the words that were poured so furiously forth, though he recognized their tenor. Now he would have hastily thrown himself forward had not Gertie placed her hand on his arm, while a proud smile curled her lip.

"No coward is this girl; and she trusts in me. By heavens, when her confidence fails I will be stark in death. Stand back, Ephraim, and see how far this thing will go."

Then she added a few words in the dialect she had at first used.

Hearing them Ephraim bowed, and stood aside. He did not trust himself to glance at Edna who was more astonished than alarmed at the whole of this strange scene. She had no time for fright; and seeing that there was some deep mystery behind all this, she could not but wonder what it might be.

Of all things Edna did not expect what came next.

The weird woman of the cabin neither halted nor hesitated; but casting up a stout bar she suddenly flung open a heavy door, let into the side of the wall.

An opening appeared, barely large enough to pass through by stooping.

The woman bent forward, listening; and peering into the darkness.

Then she gave a sharp cry.

The cry was answered by a distant moan.

Then there was the soft patter of dropping feet, and into the room bounded a brace of lions, just such as had accompanied Panther Bill when he made his attack on the stage.

They leaped into the room; but halted, one on either side of the woman, looking up at her, as if for orders.

"Watch her!" she exclaimed, pointing straight at Edna. "Keep to her; watch her. If she tries to leave, or move a finger in harm, or pry into the secrets of the house, tear her limb from limb! When I give the signal, spring!"

The brutes gave an answering whine, and stared at Edna in a coldly cruel way, as though they thoroughly understood their orders.

Probably they did. After a silent survey they moved slowly toward her, sniffed at her garments, and then, retiring, threw themselves lazily down in a corner. At the same time their mistress turned away, as if she would not trust herself to speak further.

"All right," interpreted Gertie, with the manner of one greatly relieved.

"Johanna makes strange fancies and prejudices sometimes; but if she has time to think they clear away without any damage being done. It's not the warmest welcome that gives the greatest safety; and you are really safer here than you think for. Come, we will make ourselves at home until morning. Fortunately we need nothing until morning but a place to sleep. You and I can occupy this couch; and Stoner can curl up on his blanket in the corner with the kittens; or if he don't like that he can go outside. Anyway, we're not so long to tarry. Not a word now."

Apparelled as she was the girl flung herself upon the couch, and Edna nonchalantly followed her example.

As for Stoner, he was outside; and he staid out. If he had dared to, and could have made up his mind to altogether desert the girls, he would no doubt have made good his retreat from the dangerous neighborhood.

He had no idea of sleeping that night, yet tired nature will take her dues if she has the slightest chance. Before he knew that he was nodding he had gone sound asleep, with his back propped up against the cabin, and his hands grasping his revolvers. He had not even seen Ephraim pass quietly out and away. He was going back, without a word, to the station where he had intercepted the party.

When Edna awoke the following morning it was half an hour after day break.

Her companion was sleeping quietly, the two terrible-looking brutes lay side by side across the threshold of the entrance to the cave, or whatever might be beyond; while Johanna was nowhere to be seen.

At a slight movement on the part of Edna, Gertie of the Gulch awoke with a start, and sprung to her feet.

"It's time to be moving around if we want to make an early start. Johanna, to be on the safe side, has drawn in to her shell, and Ephraim is keeping guard in the distance. We will have to look after our own forage if we don't want to be starved."

"And we have been sleeping at the mercy of those half tamed panthers?"

Edna spoke with a shudder.

In trying to be brave it appeared as though the two had overdone the thing and left themselves in entirely too much danger.

"They would not harm me. I know them all of old. They would not harm you unless they were told to, or unless they were more hungry than they generally get. Let them alone, though. They will suspect you. If you went toward them they might fly at you. You have more courage than enough, but do not let it carry you too far. Lie still, while I see what is in the larder."

The warning was not necessary. Edna had no desire to penetrate any further the mysteries of the place, and she allowed Gertie to work her will.

That young woman was possessed of the most diverse gifts. Aided by an apparently thorough knowledge of the place, she gathered together from Johanna's materials a very comfortable breakfast for three, and then called Stoner to come and help enjoy it.

She found that young man sound asleep, but it was no hard task to awaken him, though at her suggestion to come in he shook his head vigorously.

"Not any in mine. I'll hitch up ther hearse an' wait five minutes on the cargo. Then I reckon I'll light out. Ef you two want ter go through, Jim Stoner don't flinch; but if you would jist ez soon go it on foot, er take ther two leaders, hyar's ther coon ez kin find his way back ter Poker Flat a flyin'!"

"Wait a moment. That is all very natural; but I can guarantee that the road to Eden City is safer. I'll bring the breakfast outside, and you can take your time to it. If we run the

risks here you will scarcely object to meeting them."

"Oh, I'm all right. I kin pass in my cheeks ez well as any other man, so bring on yer fodder. I ain't no ways ravenous, but I kin pile down my share. Good glory! what's that?"

What would have been a piercing whistle sounded in their ears; but, as it came from somewhere within the den, it was somewhat deadened.

It was a signal that the animals obeyed. They rose quietly and disappeared through the aperture. Johanna had become cooler since her first meeting with Edna, or had altered her plans. A moment later the door closed by unseen hands, and present danger was averted.

Half an hour later and Jim Stoner had once more the ribbons in his fist and was guiding his reared steeds on a course indicated by Gertie.

She, too, seemed poised on the trail, since she chose a line of departure almost at right angles with the drift of the course of the preceding night.

"The road-agents were not the worst friends in the world," said Gertie, gayly, as the coach boomed along. "They've given us a complete outfit."

"But it strikes me that we are taking what don't belong to us."

"Oh, it's paid for. As long as Stoner, in whose care it is, don't object, you needn't let your conscience worry you. Gertie of the Gulch makes no mistakes. We'll go as far as we can on wheels, and then we'll corral the box and go ahead on horseback. Lucky for us that we dropped Tom Gouger and his pard on the road. They might have given us no end of trouble."

"And without them we will have trouble and danger enough."

"Without a doubt; but we will be equal to it all. There's nothing between here and Eden City that can stop us."

But neither of them knew the nature of the troubles that they would be called upon to face.

## CHAPTER XX.

### RED BEAR'S ADVICE.

MR. DEVLIN did not finish his sentence. He had treated the advent of Tom Gouger and his pard most cavalierly; but this new danger he recognized as a positive one, that was worthy of due consideration. He and his companions remained perfectly silent, waiting to hear a repetition of the cry, which might perhaps give them a clearer knowledge of what was near them.

Only a single sound broke the stillness of the night air.

The mustang of Dane Darringer stood, with ears bent forward and his nose outstretched, while his eyes seemed trying to pierce the darkness.

Unfortunately he was gazing down the wind. The one sound was a snort of suspicion; but none of the animal's senses could tell him what lay beyond.

Peaceable Pete crept noiselessly to Mr. Devlin's side.

"Pash!" he whispered. "One of 'em's went under. Some 'un else 'round. Show fur er frolic. Lay low an' I'll scout 'round and give yer ther breadth of ther lay-out."

Devlin held out his hand; but he was too late. The man had already departed on his self-imposed mission.

The man of peace was no novice in these matters; and he did not make the mistake of under-rating the necessity of caution. So noiselessly did he move, and so carefully, that though five pairs of eyes watched to note his progress they failed to even catch a shadowy glimpse of him.

No wonder. He was not in their front at all.

Instead of advancing directly toward the spot from whence the cry had seemed to proceed, he had dropped away in almost exactly the opposite direction, taking a wide circuit.

Minute after minute passed, until nearly half an hour had elapsed. In that time not a voice had been heard; only occasionally did it seem as though feet were moving cautiously in the distance. When Peaceable Pete suddenly dropped into camp, he came in a direction totally unexpected, though he came covered by a pair of revolvers. Dane Darringer and Walter Devlin sighted him time enough to have made it very unwholesome if they had not also recognized him.

The five men were huddled closely together, and in an audible whisper the scout told his story.

"Yer needn't be too much skeered, fur I reckon camp's safe fur to-night unless they make too much ov a racket, an' find it by mistake. But thar's one ov 'em had his last sickness. His corpus are stretched out, with a brace ov bricks ter watch it, an' the rest ov ther gang—more ner forty—hev lit out toward ther north, ter corral the slayer. I jist dunno what they war prowlin' round hyar fur; but they hed somethin' in view."

"Mine crashus if they comes to us vot will we do?" muttered Barnabas, in an anxious tone.

"Pin 'em up ter dry," answered Peaceable Pete, touching a knife or two in his belt. "But they won't. Ther cuss ez let er knife inter ther



buck hes sense fur six, an' he's takin' 'em off er flyin'."

"Who is?"

Devlin asked the question with more than ordinary interest.

"Yer can't prove it by me; but it looks dog-goned querasome. A trail to the north, straight ez hoss huffs could make it, an' er gang ov forty red devils flyin' arter it. The man ez set up ther job on 'em hed his reasons, an' a dog-goned nice piece ov work it war. Shouldn't wonder ef thar war some other coons layin' low somewhere's near."

"Bet yer a slug ter a snail skin it's ther gal!" interposed Tom Gouger. "She's more dodges ner a dog hes fleas. Ef so we kin sing small an' let her hoe her own row. It'll keep us outen ther dew."

"That's just the kind of a man I thought we'd find you. We haven't much use for that style; and I think you'd better git."

Mr. Devlin was cool, but he was in earnest; and without seeming to be quick he moved like a flash. He flung the Death Shot of Shasta straight away from him into the darkness. Then he turned to Huckleberry.

"It's time you put up the shutters and closed out too. You're two of a kind; and not good here. Travel. We want you at a safe distance; and here you are just cowardly hounds enough to sell out your own grandmother. We can go our road; and you'd better see that yours don't be in the same direction."

The indignation of Devlin was shared by the rest; and they might have added something if speech had not been checked by the sound of an attempted exclamation, that ended in a gurgle. If Gouger had forgotten the proximity of the Apaches, and drawing both revolvers had begun to shoot, it would not have caused as much consternation.

It was certain that he had stumbled on some one that had succeeded in getting within a few feet of the camp without being observed.

"Waugh!" said a low, guttural voice.

"Red Bear take 'em on ther fly, hot. Hit 'em ag'in!"

And then from the ground rose the figure of a man, clad in Indian garb, who advanced toward Devlin and the rest, carrying by throat and thigh the unlucky Gouger. He had been hugging the ground only a few paces away, and the Death Shot of Shasta had lit on top of him.

Without hesitation the Indian grappled in, but with no deadly intent for the present.

As Huckleberry saw the flight of his pard he threw up his hand—and in it was pointed the revolver that only needed a twist of the thumb and a crook of the finger to speak. He was quick enough with his weapon, but Dane Darringer was quicker with his hand.

"You double-distilled extract of foolishness, what are you going to do? Hold on!"

The advancing stranger was covered by a pair of revolvers, but Mr. Devlin had no intention of using them until the last minute.

"Hands up, red-skin!" he said, in a low but warning tone.

"Hands full," answered the Indian, with a chuckle. "Whar's Peaceable Pete? He Red Bear's friend. Tell 'em all him hunky dunky. Say. Go slow."

"He's all right, boyees," said Pete, sliding in at this juncture. "Leastwise ther's nary 'Pash about him. Ef me eyes don't go back on me, he's full-bred Sioux. But how he got outen hyar from Poker Flat, an' what's his game, I'll never tell."

"Gwine ter Eden City, 'long with rush."

"But you're not going on foot?"

"Dunno. Start on foot but steal um mule. Mule spill Red Bear an' go back Poker Flat hummin'. Red Bear all hunky dunky yet, though. 'Pache mustang close yonder. Red Bear take um pick an' gallop with rest."

"There's precious little galloping to be done by this party," said Devlin. "If you don't want that man to put a tear in your shirt-bosom you'd better drop him. I see he's feeling round for his knife. Then you can tell us what you know about the little circus that has been going on over there among the Apaches, and post us up on what you me'n crawling around our camp at this time in the morning."

"Red Bear see um crowd, find um white men, an' want ter come in. Just goin' speak when er white man lit onter him. Thar! White man go slow. Matto Luta keep him kivered."

Gouger rolled away from his grasp, and Huckleberry was ready to counsel him, for the sake of the predicament, to make no present sign. It would be dangerous to open a fusillade then and there, since the report of fire-arms would undoubtedly bring the Apaches in that direction.

There were enough of the whites to make a very good fight; but fighting was not what they were after. And even then, if the red-skins once got fairly on their trail, they would be more than likely to dog their steps for miles, until they were safe from pursuit, or until their little band was annihilated. That kind of a running fight, with its sudden dashes, its ambushes, and all its other dangers, was to be avoided.

"Pard, jist simmer right down," whispered

Huckleberry. "This hyar ain't our game; an' we'd better hold out till it's our chance ter put. Give 'em ther bank, an' let 'em deal. We'll have our turn by an' by."

"Yes, dog-gone 'em; but we'll wake snakes when they hear our thunder."

Barnabas Kain had crept around a little closer. He gave a tug at Gouger's arm, and made a gesture with his hand.

"Doan't dalk so mooch. Py und pye der dimes vill coom'. Shoost let der poy's roon dish d'ing. I dells you it's a pad schrape ve vinds ourselves in onless ve vinds der goach; an' dey vos goot men der die do."

While the threatened difficulty with Gouger was thus being allayed, the Indian was telling his experience to the other listeners.

And not much of a story did he make of it, for he told it in his laconic way, and it was impossible to guess whether he was giving the whole truth or just so much of it as suited him.

About all that he knew was that, having hidden himself about midnight, as he thought, securely, he had been startled at hearing approaching horsemen, who halted not far from him.

Some sort of a surprise was being planned, since after what seemed to be a consultation scouts were sent out to search.

Then came the cry, followed by the burst of a horseman, who broke through the Indian lines at racing speed.

The surprise gave him a start, though the main body started almost instantly in pursuit.

A little after came Peaceable Pete prowling around, and Red Bear followed him, determined on getting into good company if the thing was possible.

"Und tid yer see anything of der goach?"

Barnabas Kain put in his anxious query, as he had turned.

"Nary coach; but white squaws on the road ahead. Keep good look out, find 'em bimbye, soon. Squaws go that way; Apache go this. Red Bear take ther squaw road. Pull up, all hunky dunky. Eden City. Big rock. Heap gold. Strike right out now, 'fore Apache come back. White men wise they go 'long down."

"There's sense in that last—good, solid bed-rock sense, for it's time to be getting out of here. As for the coach, I'm half afraid that we're on the wrong trail. Jim Stoner is a man of sense, and he'd hardly strike out on such a jaunt as to find the way to Eden, with a couple girls in tow."

"Unless he was as crazy as the rest of the lunatics that have started out. If he had the fever, and saw the chance, he'd go at the risk of bullets, starvation, and the rest."

"Apache foller trail to night; but mornin' back track—scoop us all in. White chief wise, he light now. Find leetle gal bimeby. Save her scalp, an' old Kain's store. Say quick!—Red Bear slope."

The Indian had made a very plausible suggestion: it was just as likely that Stoner would push on to get as far as possible from the outlaws as that he had gone into camp for the night. It was in every way the safest plan to move on, since the new developments.

After a brief consultation apart, between Darringer and Devlin, the latter gave the word. Even scowling Tom Gouger seemed satisfied to go.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### A LONELY RIDE WITH A TERRIBLE ENDING.

"No use er talkin', Miss Gertie, it can't be did in ther higher mathematics. It's ten mile to ther gulch, an' no ways sartin what ye'll find when yer git thar."

The speaker was Jim Stoner.

There was a discouraged look on his face, and he pointed with his whip toward the notch, of which they were speaking, that was cut into the low range of hills lying across their route.

"But it must be made," answered Gertie of the Gulch.

"It is just as sure as anything I have said, what we shall find beyond that point, and we must pass it before we camp again. If we are cut off from there, where are we to turn? I tell you, only twenty-four hours more without water and we are gone."

"Purty nigh gone ez it are; but if yer say so, we'll hev ter try fur ther rifle. I wouldn't wonder ef we hed ter go it a-hossback. Ther team's ther wuss for wear. I know what hoss-flesh kin do, and I say, go slow, ef yer want any thing left in 'em fur to-morrer."

"We have no time to go slow."

"Why not?"

"The Apaches"

"Shoot the Aperches!"

"Amen! if you'll guarantee they will not play that game better than we, while we're trying it."

"But I mean ther'ain't no Aperches ter bother. They ain't comin' this way."

"Yes, but they are. I feel them in my bones. We will see them by sundown, and—by heavens! I believe they are coming in the rear now!"

As Stoner had looked forward, and pointed, so she now looked back and did the same.

The driver turned his head, following the direction indicated by her finger, and Edna Wheeler did the same.

Behind them was a long, open stretch, to the right of which was a range of broad capped sand-hills.

It was over the crest of one of these that Gertie's sharp eyes detected the line of moving forms.

"There they come; but we have the start of them. We must push on now. If we can strike the spring before them in time for a ten minute halt it will build us all up."

"You can't run er hearse ag'in' hoss-racin', an' they're bound ter ketch up. But we'll do ther best we kin. Ef Jim Stoner hes ter go over ther range he couldn't do it in better company."

"We won't go over the range—at least not in the way you mean. We'll beat them to the water hole. Then we can abandon the coach if necessary, putting what we need most on the odd horse. If they overtake us we will fight. Don't give up the ship until the decks go under."

"Oh, Jim Stoner hes ther pure grit, an' don't you furgit it; but he ain't ust ter tis kind ov a round-up ez much es he uster was afore he druv stage. I won't take water er flunk; to hyer goes. G'lang."

He threw out the long lash with the usual dexterity, and sent his team along at a faster gait, though they were well jaded with the travel of the day.

Meantime Edna had remained quiet.

She had courage for a dozen, yet travel and danger had begun to tell somewhat upon her. If she had not been sustained by strong purpose she might have broken down now.

Gertie turned suddenly toward her.

"What do you say? Are you satisfied to continue our journey; or shall we make an effort to escape? We might do it now, if they have not seen us. There is water twenty miles away to the right—as Ephraim told—but if we go for it we give up Eden City. Once on the back track, and even Jim Stoner's courage would fail him."

"On then," answered Edna, speaking resolutely.

"We will go through, or die on the road. And if we die at the hands of men then there will be other men dead before us."

"Bravo! That is the answer for me! It is more than likely that they have not seen us. If they do not soon they will not be likely to know of our presence here until they strike our trail at the water. Then the tug will come. But we are light weights; they are picked horses, and we have, at least, a chance."

The fear now was that the Apaches who had disappeared from sight, might deflect sufficiently to the right to observe the trail left by the stage; and in that case they would be warned of what was ahead. As it was, the most probable thing to expect was that they would keep a straight course from the spot where they had been seen. In that case, if both parties kept up their present rate of speed, the chances would be as already explained.

Could they keep it up though?

Stoner's horses had seemed too jaded to hold out without a rest; and he was looking out for the effect the following day if the drive of this day was made too hard.

But the teams had a reserve of vitality of which he knew nothing, since he had never before handled them. As though scenting the water miles ahead on the one hand, and on the other inspired by the enthusiasm of the girls, the horses, of their own accord, quickened their gait.

Much of the road during the long day had been hard pulling; but now, providentially as it seemed, though there were here and there grades of slight ascension and descension, the natural lay of the land continued favorable, while the soil was all that could be desired, the wheels whirling over it with little of friction or sound.

So, through the gathering shadows of the coming night, they sped on, the notched range of hills before them rising higher and higher as the little party drew nearer and nearer.

"It will be touch and go," said Stoner, turning to the girls once more, after a long silence.

"I reckon we'll have to unhitch, let them fill up, fill up ourselves, and then light out. Maybe we can have a chance ter rest; an' maybe not; but it'll be ez broad ez long. If we're water-logged they'll be ther same."

After this the coach went on in silence.

Edna looked forward—Gertie back.

The one was measuring the chances for flight; the other for fight. Neither however was likely to fail in either contingency. As the notched ridge came nearer and nearer, not even a whisper broke the silence that seemed resting around despite the low grind of the wheels and the measured hoof-beats.

Already Stoner had received his directions and he turned aside from the natural roadway that still stretched toward the south, and at somewhat slower pace began what turned out to be the very contrary of what one might have expected, for it was a smooth descent, leading down into a deep-set canyon.

"Courage!" whispered Gertie.

"A little further, and we strike water. Once refreshed and we can hold our own."



"But for how long? Not that I have lost courage; but I am like a child in your hands, and I would know more clearly the dangers of the road before us."

"Oh, it will not do, on this trail, to look too far ahead. A few hours, half a day, a score or two of miles. It is a long way yet. But if we get safely past this point I have hopes."

"If we do not?"

"We must. To fall into Apache hands would be dreadful for you—for me, more than dreadful. It would be better for me to slay you than to see you their prisoner, and for me—"

At that moment she suddenly ceased speaking.

If a cry of alarm was not forced from her lips it was because she had nerves of steel.

In front of them, on either side, and even behind, rose dark forms, and Jim Stoner, with sudden determination, bringing his whip down in one long, stinging cut, exclaimed:

"Apaches, by hokey!"

This was a different thing from road-agents; and just now he was more than an ordinary driver. He did not delay this time; but practiced at once the tactics that had been so satisfactory when finally tried with Panther Bill and his crew.

It was a desperate venture; but right into the line of dark forms sprung the horses, knocking down three or four of the nearest.

Still there was no sound of shot or hiss of arrow. The savages held their hands, perhaps because they underrated the prowess of the whites, perhaps because they were thoroughly bent on taking them alive.

Instead, a strong hand grasped each bridle, clinging desperately to each plunging animal, and a cry went up which could not be mistaken.

It meant, halt or die.

Then Stoner threw the whip from his right hand and drew his revolver; five hands went up, each garnished with a weapon; there were five flashes, followed by sharp reports; and then the horses swept on, straight along the darkening course of the deepening canyon.

#### CHAPTER XXII.

PEACEABLE PETE PINS A FEW UP TO DRY.

We left Mr. Devlin and his little army dealing on a movement.

It took no very great wisdom to come to that conclusion. Unless they were hungering for a fight, prudence and every other consideration told them to go, and that in a hurry.

"Hold on er bit!" said Gouger, at this minute. "This hyar crowd don't hang tergether fur a cent; but it's ther best we kin do. But if yer think me an' Huckleberry's goin' ter prod erlong erfootback yer bigger fools than jinnerly kin dror breath in Southwestern Arizony. Give us er show, will yer; er ain't yer a bit white?"

"There are two mustangs in the party, and their owners expect to ride them. You don't suppose we'd trust them in *your* hands, do you? Bless your soul, that would be the last of them; and then where would we come in at? If you don't like to foot it, sit down on your luck and wait until some one loans you a quarter. We didn't ask you to hang on, and we don't care how soon you drop off."

"But we does; an' we ain't droppin' off either. Ef ye'll hold on half an hour, an' this hyar chap ez calls hisself Peaceable Pete 'll show us wharabouts them four 'Pash ar' corraled, Tom Gouger an' his pard kin answer fur ther rest."

"You mean—ah, I understand. If you do that job I'll say you have more nerve than I gave you credit for. All right, go ahead and try it. We'll wait half an hour."

"Kim on, then, Huckleberry. We'll show 'em what ther Death Shot ov Shasta an' his pard kin do. Ef ther rooster with ther knives hez ther sand ter jine in he kin have hoss-flesh under him when he needs it, an' I tell yer, ye'll need it bad afore yer strike white men's camp ag'in."

Huckleberry was silent, as usual letting his pard lead in the conversation, but he drew up to the side of Gouger, ready to follow his guidance.

"Yer talkin' sense now," said Pete, struck with the idea. "Ef I hed pards I'd rely on, I'd swear we'd do it. I'll reesk it with you; but don't yer disremember if yer try ter go back on me I'll pin yer both up ter dry. Peaceable Pete ar' my handle, but I'm a bad man with ther knives, an' I kin sling 'em a mile."

The feelings that these men had for each other did not augur well for the success of the enterprise; but without further parley they glided away.

"It's a chance if we ever see them alive again," remarked Devlin, quietly. "But we'll wait the half-hour and see what luck they have in the stampede. If they bring the real hornets down upon us it may be just as well. We'll have the frolic over one way or the other."

Peaceable Pete did not trust his associates; yet, when, in a measure, dared to join them in an adventure, which, if successful, would be so evidently to his interest, he did not hesitate.

He gave a few whispered directions for finding the point for which they were to glim, and then silently crept forward, the two following

close at his shoulders. If they meditated any treachery, he was certainly, to all appearances, at their mercy.

Though his plans had not been explained, the idea suggested by Gouger was understood by all.

The Apache who had been stricken down, and the three who had remained to take charge of him had undoubtedly been mounted, and it was against their horses rather than against them that the expedition was directed.

The chances for success were not great, and the dangers of discovery were plenty; but the three men crept on in silence. Their greatest fear was that they might stumble upon the living Apaches moving about—for it was hardly to be supposed that the three would all remain close to the corpse, when only the presence of one was needed.

Once Gouger spoke, and that in the lowest of whispers:

"Ef we find our men we must mount 'em jist ez they lie, an' all tergether. Ef thar's any bunglin' we may get more than we barg'in fur. I'll give ther word, and then go."

It was some distance to the point at which Peaceable Pete was aiming, and the roundabout way and cautious advance made it seem longer by far than it really was.

At length Pete halted and peered anxiously around.

He thought he was near the spot; yet he could not distinguish the forms of which he was in search.

Then Gouger touched his arm lightly and pointed.

At that he turned his eyes somewhat, and saw the dusky figures that were limned against the sky.

The three crouched lower and crept nearer.

It was man to man now, and the white men did not fear the result of a hand-to-hand struggle, so far as these red-skins were concerned. The danger was that, if discovered, an unlucky pistol-shot or a single sharp cry might give the alarm to those at a distance.

It was of vital necessity that the taking off should be sudden and silent.

The red-men were on the alert.

They held their mustangs by the bridles and looked cautiously about them. They were there to watch, and they did not neglect their duty. To get nearer seemed impossible. To even retreat from their present position would have been, for the white men, an absolute difficulty.

While Gouger and the others watched the blurred-looking figures of the Apaches, one of the latter seemed to start slightly, and bend forward in the direction of the whites.

He had discovered their low lying forms. The ball had to be opened in good earnest.

Gouger's hand already grasped a cocked revolver, which now rose into line.

Huckleberry duplicated the movement.

At that instant Peaceable Pete sprung to his feet without awaiting the signal which Gouger would have given an instant later.

He had his own way.

In his left hand he held two of the knives that had garnished his belt. In his right hand he held a third.

As he rose he flung the first; and then, like flashing lightning, the other two followed.

There were three ghastly little "chugs," as the knives went home; as many half-uttered cries that ended in groans; and then the three forms toppled over and fell prone.

Each one had a twelve-inch bowie, driven clear and square through the heart.

As the last one fell, Peaceable Pete wheeled; and in his uplifted hands were two more knives.

Appalled somewhat, and more than confused, Gouger and his partner fell back. Neither had any conscience to speak of, but at that moment they felt very much like whipped dogs; for Gouger had drawn a knife, and was creeping forward.

For what, Peaceable Pete would not have been slow in guessing if he had not had his suspicions before.

"Not this hyar time, Tommy. I kin take keer ov meself. It's hoss-flesh we's after now, not blood; an' thar's no time fur foolin'. You galoots can go on ahead now, an' we'll scoop up ther cayuses."

"Ez usual, yer hold over me, pard. Kim on, Huckleberry, thar's luck ag'in' us on this hyar trail."

Peaceable Pete had just been in time. If he had been a little more confiding his corpse would have lain by the side of those of the three Apaches. It was a wonder that he could hold his own hand, but he had reasons.

While the two men went forward to secure the mustangs, the bridles of which were still clutched in their stiffening fingers, Pete paused to draw the dripping blades from the bodies of the Apaches. He wiped them coolly on the grass, thrust them back in his belt, and then looked sharply about.

Each of the toughs had secured two of the horses. As he looked up Gouger exclaimed:

"Hands on ther board, pard, an' no bad blood. Yer kin take yer choice. It ar' time ter be floatin' back."

"I'll check her up fur ther next time—an'

then look out. If yer tries it ag'in it's yer death-warrant. Hyar goes."

Mounted on the first mustang he came to, Peaceable Pete led the way back toward the party they had left, and found them anxiously awaiting the result of the expedition that had double hazards.

Peaceable Pete had nothing to say of the attempted but defeated treachery. When Darringer, moved by curiosity that was perhaps natural, asked how the matter had sped, he answered, grimly:

"All with ther boots on; an' them ez didn't hev boots wore moccasins."

It seemed no unfair movement on the part of Huckleberry, who brought the extra mustang, that he should hand it over to Barnabas Kain, though the act left Red Bear, alone of the party, on foot.

"You'll hev ter go it alone, red-skin," remarked Gouger. "I c'ldn't go back on er white man anyhow; so yer needn't think it hard."

The effort made to placate the Sioux was not necessary. He appeared to have a fund of good spirits, larger than the average aboriginal, though he could be just as stoical when he chose.

"All bunky dunky," he answered. "Red Bear go right 'long on wheels. When Gouger come horseback, Injun git there on foot. He no horse Injun. Waugh!"

Very true was his statement, and it had its meaning that was not hard to understand. On foot, the "horse Indians"—such as the Apaches and Comanches—are positively helpless.

This man came of different stock, and whether he rode or walked he was ready and untiring.

During the short balance of the night, and through the long day that followed, with its seeming interminable march, he kept his place with the rest—sometimes walking, sometimes running, and all the time feeling the journey as little as any.

#### CHAPTER XXIII.

SPOTTED FEATHER, THE APACHE, LAYS HIS AMBUSH.

THE coach dashed down into the dark canyon at a flying pace, followed by a regular volley of arrows, mingled with a few bullets.

None of the shots took effect, since they were fired almost at random, the fugitives having almost instantly disappeared. Owing to the lay of the ground, of which the Apaches had not thought, the missiles all went too high.

Then one of the red skins uttered a hoarse howl, the meaning of which could only be understood by one who was acquainted with the language.

At once the firing stopped; and those who had not already followed, plunged headlong down the trail without waiting to mount the horses which were nowhere visible. Cries, shouts and savage whoops, following the din of the firearms, made the place seem a veritable little pandemonium. It actually looked as though the present chances were in favor of the coach and its cargo.

Stoner seemed to think so. He burst through the line silent as a trapped wolf, but he broke out with a yell of triumph as he saw the success of his effort.

The cry came too soon.

With Gertie encouraging and directing him, he traversed the first few hundred yards, but then there came a stoppage as sudden as it was unexpected.

Here, right across the narrow canyon, some one had built a stout wall of rocks.

In that direction the further progress of the coach was absolutely barred until the obstacle could be removed. Had the horses not seen the barricade before even sharp-eyed Stoner, there would have been an awful crash.

"Lost!" exclaimed Elna, at last despairing.

"Not yet. Quick. Follow me. We can fight on foot, and for the last it is better to be on the other side of the wall."

It was not so dark but what, being so close, they could see what was in front of them, Gertie sprung down and over the wall, the others following.

The Apaches, seeing the coach come to a halt, gave a yell and closed around it—to find it tenantless.

As the horses had swayed partly around the three had, unseen, made their escape from the further side.

No question was there, though, as to where they had gone. The savages dashed on at the rude wall, that was formed of a few great rocks rolled together at a point where the canyon abruptly narrowed. Though they could stop a coach they hardly presented much impediment to a person on foot.

Then from one end of the wall to the other there stretched a line of flame. Not only three shots were there; but a volley, from what seemed a little army.

The red-skins had dropped into as nice a little ambushade as even they themselves had ever prepared.

No halt nor let up was there.

After that first volley the crashing fire con-



tinued, irregular but deadly. Perhaps a dozen were killed or wounded. The charge was swung back as by main force, and as the assailants suddenly became the assailants, leaping over the barrier, firing as they came, the demoralized Apaches turned their faces rearward and fled.

Though they had reached the canyon before the coach, yet some one had reached it before them. They had seen the coach and headed it off to lay an ambush; but Peaceable Pete and Red Bear were their equals in desert craft and savage warfare, and Mr. Devlin and the rest were no mean adepts.

Up through the canyon rushed the fugitives, in a panic, and behind them came the little army of whites.

"Drive 'em while yer got ther chancel!" shouted Peaceable Pete, rushing forward in the lead.

"I tell yer we've got ter swing 'em out er whoopin'. Ef we hold ther water they've got ter git afore they's starved out."

"When yer git ther bulge, keep it," roared Gouger, forgetting his animosity in the heat of the fray. "We have ther dead medecine on 'em an' they'll be blood on ther moon!"

And still the shots continued, though at longer intervals, for now each man sought to make his bullets tell beyond a doubt. Even Barnabas Kain had the fury of battle on him; and though he never opened his lips he aimed with as deadly coolness as the best.

The two girls did not follow the charge. As they sprung over the barricade they became conscious that forms were lurking on the other side, and seeing them rise up, weapons in hands, they realized that they were friends.

They turned, then, as brave as any, and poured in their fire, though with what effect no one could tell; but when Peaceable Pete led the countercharge they stood, leaning partly against a huge rock and partly against each other, watching the fray with breathless eagerness.

"What does it mean? Who are they?" whispered Edna. "What are they doing here; and if they beat off the Indians are we any the better off?"

"Who are they? Have you no eyes nor ears? They are old friends—the men who came to our rescue when Panther Bill would have stopped us, and with them they bring the passengers that we then lost. How it has happened I know not; but in some way they have followed us through, and reappear in the nick of time. We are safe."

And as she uttered these words Edna gave a short, quick cry.

No wonder, for out from the side-wall of the canyon there sprung an Apache, who, clutching either girl by the throat, held them so for an instant, and then dashed Edna Wheeler to the ground. Then he gathered Gertie's two wrists in one of his immense hands, and with his other arm lifted her clear from the ground.

"Waugh! Gertie laugh at Spotted Feather—ma e him game for all him tribe—who laugh now?" She die dozen times, not enough. He make red braves theirselves grow cold when they hear what him do!"

In his voice there was a terrible concentration of hate, that showed how truly Gertie had spoken when she said that it would be more than dreadful to fall into these hands.

She knew this man—if man he could be called—and he had her at his mercy. At the very best she could only hope for sudden death. Yet she did not altogether despair.

"Release me, Spotted Feather," she said, with an outward calm. "It is your only chance for life. Leave me unharmed, and I swear to you I will allow you to escape in the darkness. At tempt to harm me and a cry will bring my friends on you to take terrible vengeance. We have outwitted you, and of all your band not one will escape. I show mercy to you; take it, or die."

He understood her well enough, and believed her better than she had hoped for.

He did not doubt but that he had been drawn into a deliberately-planned ambushade—he did not doubt that if he accepted her offer he could escape. But as he had risked all to get this girl, so now he had no thought of giving her up, even if he died with her.

His hand tightened on the little round wrists until the gripe seemed like a closing band of steel that would cut then in two.

"White squaw knows Spotted Feather kill if she cry out. She live, have chance fool him ag'in—mabba. He kill boy anyhow. Then be off. No use. He hold her tight. So?"

There was a moment of struggle, as Gertie made a vain, mad effort to wrench herself from his grasp. Then Spotted Feather, letting Gertie's feet once more touch the earth, and leaning forward, drew the knife from his belt.

Edna lay motionless.

As she felt her head had struck the rock against which she had been leaning. The blow had deprived her of her senses, and she could not see the knife that hung above her breast.

Even had her eyes been open she could hardly have distinguished, in the darkness, the intention of the chief, since at the distance of only a few feet everything was dim and indistinct.

Gertie's trained eyes could see too much.

She closed them as Spotted Feather drew her forward. She had brought this girl here, and whether she hated or loved her, this was the end of it all. She would not have risked a cent on Edna's life.

"Scarcely, my colored friend. I wouldn't give half a bad orange for your chances. Hands up, or I shall be compelled to let light through you. My name is Darringer, and I have you foul."

In all her adventurous life, never had an interruption come more opportunely.

Gertie heard the easy drawl with a wild rush of thankfulness that thrilled through her from eyebrow to heel. Here was aid right at hand. It was Dane Darringer that was talking, and mingled with his speech was the sharp click of his revolver, as he forced back the hammer.

Darringer would probably have fired first and talked afterward, but the fact of the case was that Gertie was between him and Spotted Feather, and he hesitated to shoot. A sudden movement might throw her into the line of his bullet.

He had remained behind on guard, he alone of the seven not joining in the mad rush. He came just in time.

The knife of the bending Spotted Feather did not fall.

At the sound of the voice he straightened himself, and raised his hand high above Gertie's head.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### A TRUCE FOR A DAY.

At that moment Darringer fired.

It was a snapshot, taken at the arm that had just come fairly into view, but it went home, passing through and through the brawny member, that but a moment before had encircled Gertie, and down from Spotted Feather's gripe ru g the knife.

Certain it was that that arm would be of no further use in that fray.

As the sound of the shot rung out on the night air, there came an encouraging cry from the other side of the barricade. At that Spotted Feather hesitated no longer.

Dropping Gertie's wrists, he wheeled away.

"Spotted Feather have 'is revenge yet; Gertie can live for it."

Then he darted down the canyon toward those recesses which the girls had not yet explored.

As the form of Gertie no longer covered him, Darringer again threw up his arm. The mark was blurred, but it was a large one. At that distance, a shot was certain death, and the escape of Spotted Feather meant danger for Gertie in the future.

Yet she did not hesitate; but as Darringer's hand rose, so did Gertie's, casting his weapon upward before he had time to pull the trigger.

"Hold! Let him go! I owe him one; after this our accounts will be even."

"All right," said Darringer, calmly. "It's too late now, even if you change your mind, which I suppose you will. Maybe I had better not have interfered at all. He seemed like an affectionate sort of a cuss—saving your presence."

"Affectionate like a wolf. It is no love for the man, but because, brute though he is, I once deceived him. He may never know it, but I have saved his life now, and the account is even. But who are you, and are we in safety or in danger?"

"Oh, I don't begrudge your little amusements, and the gentleman will show his gratitude in due time. Dane Darringer will have another foe on his track from this time on. That's natural. As for safety, that's the normal condition out here, if you hold enough sixes. The boys seem to have done well. If I had not been left behind to guard the horses, they might have done better. Somebody is in hot retreat, and I reckon it's the red-skins."

Sure enough, the noise of departing horsemen could be plainly heard. The remaining Apaches had recovered their mustangs, and had darted from a branch of the canyon out upon the plain, while the firing had altogether ceased.

At the same moment the two now thought of Edna, who, in the need for action, had been forgotten, or at least overlooked.

Dane Darringer took a step or two backward and raised her from the ground just as, with a little gasp, she returned to semi-consciousness.

"Who have we here?" he asked. "Another of the gentlemen to whom you owe one? If so, I think he has it."

As he spoke, with his disengaged hand he struck a match, and held the feeble flame over her face.

Then he started.

"Heavens! It's a woman in masquerade, and she is wounded."

He flung Edna across his shoulder and scrambled over the wall of rocks, Gertie following.

"We must go back to the water."

On the other side of the wall he met Peaceable Pete.

Three or four of the knives were gone from his belt, and he was seeking them among the slain.

"I pinned er few ov 'em down ter dry; but I'm lookin' round now fur the skewers. A knife comes handiest ter me; but I should 'a' orter used my shooters."

Watch out for the rear. One of the reds got away, and he may make a dash for the horses. I've got one of our wounded there that needs looking after.

"All secure out hyar, then; but who's been plugged?"

"No one, perhaps. I cannot yet tell. Keep your eyes open to the rear though."

So he strode on, bearing the now reviving Edna on his shoulder.

The girl did not move nor cry out, though as yet she could not guess into whose hands she had fallen.

After a little they came into the lighter mouth of the canyon.

Then, turning to one side a few paces Darringer stood by the side of the strange basin that was filled by the little stream that trickled out from the rock just above it.

Here he placed her on her feet, and finding that she could stand very well he withdrew his arm, and looked somewhat eagerly in her face.

A woman with the courage of this was worth gazing at; but at that instant Barnabas Kain came creeping back.

"Mine crayshus, vot was dose? Ish she dead?"

Dane Darringer started, whether it was at the sight of the white face upturned toward his own, or because of the interruption, it would have been hard to say.

"So you drip to the woman; maybe she's a friend of yours. At any rate it's been a pretty close thing for her and her friend. Just as lucky as could be that I was around; though, after all, there has been no great harm done. How is the thing going?"

"It goes all right. Dere pees no more tanger; undt der roadt pees glear der vay der Eden City. Put dish pees von of der girls I leetsh in der goach. Vere pees der odder?"

"Here," said Gertie as she stepped promptly forward.

She was tolerably true to her companion, but she had lingered a moment, to make sure of the safety of the coach. The team had wheeled and stood cowering in the darkness, close to the left hand wall of the canyon. She called the attention of Peaceable Pete to them, and then followed on.

After all there was very little damage done. There was a cut on the top of Edna's head from which the blood had run over her face, but the application of a little water remedied all that, and brought back at the same time her courage and her clearness of mind.

Then Dane Darringer left the two together, and went forward to where Devlin and the rest were keeping guard.

There had been no pursuit beyond the mouth of the pass, since the Apaches were mounted; and those that had escaped never halted until they were well out of pistol range. That they would return to renew the contest was not at all likely, though they did not go any great distance. Their dusky forms were visible, watching and waiting.

In a few words Darringer explained what had happened in their rear, and received intelligence of all that had transpired here.

"Oh, we have them," said Mr. Devlin, hopefully. "All we have to do is to hold on here twenty-four hours. There's no other water within thirty miles—and that's on the back track. Chuck them out their corpses with the hair on, so they won't be too ravenous, and they're bound to light out."

"Put sh'posin' dey grawl aroundt in froondt, und shrike oud aheadt, den who vill holdt der edgel?"

Barnabas Kain, who had again crept to the front, urged this in his insinuating way; and it had as disagreeable an effect as he could have wished.

"That's so," said Mr. Devlin. "I suppose the best plan would be to go out and kill 'em all off. Still there's a chance that they can get through at any other point, and I'll swear we can hold this, we'll hold on and see."

"I reckon some of us hed better go gunnin' for that blasted Spotted Feather. He's er cuss on wheels, an' if we ain't spry he'll be apt ter strike us afore mornin'. I'm more afeared on him than ther hull balance ov ther galoots."

As Gouger had done good service in the fray he felt as though he had the right to speak up.

"Never mind him. If he can get ahead of Peaceable Pete I'll take my gruel as hot as it comes. Just keep shady now, I think there's a move on foot."

A move there was, as Devlin suggested. A single horseman had left the main body and was riding cautiously toward the canyon. In his hand he waved something that seemed intended for a flag of truce.

"There's business now," said Devlin. "They want a talk; and I guess we'd better give it to them. If nobody can do better I'll go out and meet him myself."

No one thought they could do better; and he rode forward without a dissentient voice.

Half-way between the two bodies of men the



two met; and for ten minutes seemed to be engaged in a discussion.

Then Devlin came galloping back.

"We got through his lingo all straight, I guess, and I've made terms. We pack out their dead and wounded and they clear out. Spotted Feather is to take care of himself, but they agree to try and let him know that we've come to terms, and we give him safe passage if he wants it. The treaty holds if we turn out the dead bucks, all with their hair on. If we can't do that it's war to the knife and the knife to the hilt."

"An' yer goin' ter trust ther red niggers?"

Gouger spoke with an accent of scorn, but possibly it was meant for regret. It seemed a pity to lose the chance for hair.

"It's the best we can do, and mighty good at that. We'll keep an eye open though, and if there are any tricks going we'll hold a handful of trumps. To work now. I want to see their noble forms disappearing in the distance."

It was a task that involved some disagreeable labor, but if the Apaches intended to keep their word it was so manifestly to their benefit that the little party did not hesitate. In a brief period the dead were carried to the spot indicated. Then came the few wounded. There were only two of them.

Then, when both parties had retired a little, several signal lights began to glow on the plain.

After a little there was an answering signal—a pistol discharged from a point further on, and really above them. Spotted Feather had already made great progress in trying to scale the wall of the canyon, and he had reached a point where the signals from without could be seen.

He understood that some treaty had been made, and trusted in it, for immediately he retraced his steps, and after a few words at a distance stalked boldly up to the whites. He even halted an instant to speak.

"Gertie still safe. Good. Some day Spotted Feather find her again. He have revenge then. Look out. White men have long trail to water. If they die in the desert it make 'em much happier, for Spotted Feather worse than hunger and thirst. Waugh!"

He passed straight on after his warning, and when he had reached the ranks of his band they closed around him and they swept away.

"The Indian tells the truth. We've got the desert before us, and the worst part of it too. If what Kain tells is true we've got a forty-hour jaunt without water. After that—if we live through it—it will be easy lines. We'll take a good square rest here, and then make the effort. If we go under there's not much use in any one else trying to find Eden City."

So Mr. Devlin told off the different guard reliefs, posted them as, in his semi-military mind, it seemed to him they should be posted, and then went calmly to sleep. Tom Gouger, Peaceable Pete and Huckleberry were in the first relief, and the others were arranged as best they could be.

So, finally, after a rest that all seemed to need, the little band pushed away from the spring in the canyon, with their faces turned resolutely in what they hoped was the direction of Eden City.

They knew the dangers before them; but now there was no going back.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE BARRANCA IN THE PLAIN.

WHY recount step by step the terrible journey that followed the night conflict in the canyon.

Had the party entered upon this longest stretch of the desert unwarned they would have perished beyond a doubt.

As it was there came a time when right across their seeming course there yawned a hideous barranca, that stretched to the right and the left in what seemed a line impassable and without end.

To add to the dangers of the situation the second night had closed in, and it was still miles beyond to where they hoped to find water. From that spot could they reach it, it was according to Barnabas, but a day's journey and then they came into a region reasonably well watered, and not far removed from which would be the mythical Eden City.

But how to reach it? Gertie looked hopelessly at the dark plain that lay beyond the barranca; and Barnabas Kain gazed down over the edge of the sheer precipice, with something very like to dismay in his face. The guides, who alone professed to know anything of the route, were at fault; and what knowledge they had only went to confirm their fears.

This gash in the plain, without bridge or crossing, had no business to be athwart their path.

It was there; and that was proof positive that they had wandered from the true course.

The only question was whether it could be flanked by a detour.

In that case they might still be not so far wrong. If it extended, however, for miles and miles, as such gulches sometimes do, the result would be death in the desert. They could not go forward, and it was too late to turn back.

A few hours' delay here might not make so

much difference; but what could they expect to find on the other side?

"Well, Barnabas, I reckon we've made about as much out of it as if we had gone piling on alone: but what do you think of it anyhow?"

Mr. Devlin settled himself with his usual coolness to the losing game before him.

"I teclares ter crayshus I p'leves ve vos losht."

As Barnabas spoke he pressed his hands together until the nails of the one seemed to sink into the flesh of the other. If ever a man seemed possessed with feelings too deep for utterance it was Barnabas, just at that moment.

"That is bad for all of us; but very bad for you. You couldn't advance an idea of whereabouts Eden City ought to lay, could you?"

"Mine heavens! no! Dere ish der shpot, right vere mine finger points to. put it ish not dere—or vere toes ter parranka come mit?"

"Exactly. That is the question. And I suppose you have no way out of this scrape that you can suggest?"

"Not a way. Ve kin tie right here, if we kin not fly. Vy tid ve coom?" "Tish vorse dan te brison at Sacramento."

"Decidedly worse, because there you had your chances—and pulled through. Here you haven't a ghost of a chance. In fact, Mr. Kain, if you don't see us through this rifle I shall be compelled to kill you."

"My coolness, vot you do dot for! 'Tish ish ash pad fur me ash fur you."

"I can't help but think, Mr. Barnabas, that you are an infernal fraud; and that you had some sort of a scheme in view in leading us here. Now I'm a bad man to beat, and to make sure that you won't crow when I'm over the range I shall kill you before I start on the journey."

"Inteet, inteet, you moost pe crazy. V.n you see I'm in t'e sam' feex."

And Barnabas Kain would have poured out a torrent of words, had not Devlin stopped him sternly:

"That's enough; I'm not much on the talk. I don't like to turn loose on a man without giving him warning. That's all. You've heard my bell ringing—look out for the engine."

Then Devlin turned away—for they had stood a little apart from the rest. Red Bear had gone in one direction and Peaceable Pete the other, for a short reconnaissance along the edge of the barranca. Dane Darringer, meantime, was keeping a keen eye on everything around him—Tom Gouger and his pard especially. He did not trust them, notwithstanding the good service that they had done in the fight with the Apaches.

Notwithstanding the cool threat, Barnabas stuck to Devlin. He turned with him and followed him back, listening to every word that fell from his lips, as though chained to him by some weird fascination.

Gouger and Huckleberry had little to say. They looked and listened glumly, but either hope had not altogether left them or they were recklessly indifferent to their fate. When Peaceable Pete came back they scarcely cast on him an inquiring glance, though the others crowded eagerly around him.

"No use, boyees. Ef we foller ther lead ov this hyar hole in ther ground we won't know our course from a back track afore we've gone an hour. Ef we want ter git so'wads we've got ter wait till daylight an' find some way ter git across. A lariat can't help us, fur without ther hosses we're gone up, an' by mornin' I'm afeared it'll be too late anyhow."

"And a very creditable job it all is to Mr. Kain, or whoever put it up. The only thing that puzzles me is to know how he expects to get out—unless he's bargained to take in the next world the reward he can't get in this."

Perhaps Barnabas had his plans. While Devlin and Peaceable Pete attracted attention to themselves he bent over toward Gouger.

"Isn't it understood? You sbtick py me an' I bulls you droo, und blanks town der shiners, more ash dose vot you got allredy?"

"Till the last horn blows, old man," was the rowled answer. "I caue inter ther game on ther square, for gold; but I've got sech er load ov hate piled up ag'in' those men, that I'd run ther thing through if I didn't get a cent. But don't yer go back on us—er ther last horn 'll toot fur you."

"Resht easy, undt nefer mind vot dose boor fools says. Barnabas Kain bulls you droo. But votch mine handt, an' ven I gifes der sign, if it can be tid, dey moost trop."

"That's ther figger. Now, stow yer wind. Ther red nigger's coming back. I want ter hear what he has ter say, fur blame my hide ef I'm sure yer knows how ter git out, fur all yer blow. An' time's gittin' mighty short!"

The search of Red Bear had been equally unsuccessful.

No crossing place had he found.

"Him not very wide, but in dark no tell how wide. Saff place maybe hoss jump across; but take daylight, find narrow place. Best camp right here."

"Correct, as usual, and just as I figured it," interposed Darringer. "It will take daylight to see us out, unless we have more luck than I'm

looking for. We might try in a small way to see how far it is across. Right here I'll swear it's not under twenty feet, and it may be forty.

I reckon I'll try it and see."

He went to his mustang.

The jaded beast stood quietly enough, and looked very little as though it could perform the task which had just been discussed.

He came back with a coiled rope in his hand, that had a weight at the one end.

Retaining the other end in his hand he gave a fling, and the rope straightened out, forty feet at least, without reaching the opposite side.

"Any narrower places than this, Red Bear? Because if they are not, we needn't mind about waking early in the morning. We won't be able to start."

"Lots. Try him once and see. No think um Red Bear talk cheap hear hissself blow. Come try um. Mebbe heap tigger jump than him look—mebbe no. In mornin' be all um lunky dunky. E?"

The Indian led the way to a spot not very far distant, pointing to the opposite brink, which really did not look so far away, although, in that light, it was impossible to tell.

The experiment would soon show. Although it seemed like a waste of time, it was really not so. If by a desperate leap one man and horse could get across, the hope for all would be very largely increased. The riderless horses could be driven to the leap, and the riders themselves could be aided over with a lariat bridge.

In a moment or two there was what seemed to be a glad cry.

The experiment had shown that the distance, at the spot selected for the second trial, was not so much beyond the ordinary range of Dane Darringer's mustang.

The cry acted as a signal.

Those that had remained behind pushed forward to see what new chance for escape had been found.

Then there was another cry, that ended in something that sounded like a fiendish laugh; and the eyes that were hastily turned saw a horseman galloping away for dear life.

It was Barnabas Kain; and before they could organize pursuit, he was lost to sight in the distance.

"Let him go," said Devlin, more sternly than any had yet heard him speak. "It is useless to follow him. Hold hard, Gouger; I've got you covered, and Darringer holds the drop on Huckleberry. This gang holds together now, and if you try to follow we'll kill you both."

Devlin was just in time. The Death Shot of Shasta was about to vault upon his mustang. A moment later, and he would have taken a snap shot and then vanished.

That settled it.

There was no pursuit, and in miserable silence they awaited the coming morning.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE POISONED POOL.

THE plan suggested was a desperate one, considering the state of their mustangs, but it offered a hope—and full of it, they all lay by the side of the barranca that night. Some of them even slept.

At daylight, a careful inspection showed Devlin that the width was just within the powers of his horse to cover, carrying him on his back.

What he would not have dared at night, in the full daylight he attempted—and succeeded. Then the horses were urged to the leap.

One, only, failed.

It reached the edge of the opposite bank, which crumbled under its feet; and it went down into the dark gash. A scream of mortal terror, ending in a sullen, smothered crash, told its fate.

With Devlin on the one side, Darringer on the other, and plenty of rope between them, it was not hard to get the rest across in safety.

Now that they were across the gash in the plain, the route ahead was still horribly uncertain. No reserve of strength was then in the mustangs; and if another such an obstacle was met, it was more than likely—it was almost certain—that they would perish.

Yet before them, though still miles away, they seemed to distinguish the low-lying landmarks that were to guide their course, and without halt or consultation they staggered on.

"I tell yer this an' a ding-blasted fool trip," growled Gouger, at length. "Thar's no good comes of hev'n' shemales aboard. I never seen one ez warn't a Joliner. An' ef we'd 'a' follered keen on, las' night, yer kin bet we'd 'a' brung up at water. Ther derved Jew knowed er t'ing er two, an' war a-throwin' off. I'll gamble big his coat-tails never dropped till he hed his nose in the drink."

"Perhaps," answered Devlin, who overheard him.

"But if we didn't strike water, what would there have been left by the time we had taken the steel out of the horses, chasing him around? It's my opinion he lost his sand and started on the back trail. If he did, man nor angels can save him."

"An' we've got a durned poor show ourselves," clipped in Huckleberry.



"That's as it turns out. You can't draw to an ace and get four of a kind every time. Play your hands as they come; and a blind wins in the long run."

The two girls had long before this been transferred from the coach to the backs of two of the team, and they held their own with the rest, sometimes despairing, yet for the most part full of courage.

The barranca passed, hope brightened again. Gertie professed no exact knowledge of the road; but she had full faith in the course, and though she could see that the horses were failing, and that there were yet miles to be traversed, she believed that the lucky star, that so long had guided her, would still remain in the ascendant.

The others asked but few questions of her. They had already heard Barnabas recount the direction to be taken, and she had only reiterated his statements. They knew as much as she—perhaps one or two of them more.

Besides. A party in such plight cared little to talk. Parched lips, blurred eyes, trembling hands—there were plenty of signs that the work was beginning to tell on them all.

Red Bear was on foot now, for it was his mustang that had dropped down into the barranca.

He seemed to care little for that, but strode on with his untiring gait, that was faster than a horse could walk. It was evident that any moment he chose he could leave the others far behind.

Devlin saw this.

"If you feel like it, light out. You can see how the land lays ahead, and if it's bad, come back. It may save us a couple of miles, and I tell you, just now, miles are big things. It wouldn't take many of them to fix us out."

"Right you are, but Red Bear all hunky dunky. He find um way clean through. So long. Horse prick up nose, stick out him ears. Find water bimeby soon. Yonder. See?"

He pointed with his finger, and then pushed forward. He went four feet to the mustang's three, and when he accelerated his speed he ran straight as an arrow. In what did not seem a very great length of time he became only a moving speck on the plains.

Then he vanished altogether.

"Death on wheels!" exclaimed Gouger.

"Ther infernal red bez hit ther water."

"Ter think his nose are in ther drink, an' us, what's white, are driftin' along in ther dry. On, cinnermun b'ars an' wil' cats, but it make me r'ar!"

Huckleberry's echo was hardly noticed. His mouth was too dry for scientific swearing, and his voice scarcely rose above a husky whisper. It was enough that horses and men seemed to scent the water. The animals quickened their gait of their own accord, and the riders no longer feared to urge them.

Unless there had been some terrible mistake they would soon strike a depression where water from an underground stream, forcing its way upward, oozed slowly into a natural reservoir.

The pool would be of no great size, but, if Barnabas and Eubraim could be believed, it would, unless lately exhausted, supply the immediate needs of all of them.

If exhausted—well, the records of the desert could show many such cases, they might sit around the slowly filling spring until they died of thirst. The horrors of Tantalus would be nothing to theirs.

At length they reached the crest, where Red Bear had disappeared, and looked beneath them.

There was a spot below where the desert seemed less savage; where the eternal sameness was broken. It had been no falsehood or delusion. The water was there. They could see the tall form of Red Bear, clad in his Indian garb, as he stood with folded arms, gazing downward.

They waited for no signal, but dashed on, Tom Gouger and his pard in the lead. For the moment the horses seemed to have gone mad, and even the pulse of cool Mr. Devlin beat a little faster as he saw the water sign before him.

And then, just as they neared the spot sufficiently to see the recesses of the basin, and the shimmering water, Red Bear turned and stood between them and it with outstretched hands, waving them back, with a slow, stern gesture.

"Outer ther way, red!" shouted the Death Shot, his voice rising in a shrill scream.

"Outer ther way, er by ther livin' holies yer er dead nigger. Fust come, fust sarved, er meat fur breakfast!"

His revolver was out and up, and he would have fought the continent for a draught from the pool.

Red Bear stepped aside and folded his arms. "Drink, then," he said, "an' die. Injun warn him."

Off from his mustang rolled Gouger. Although their flasks and canteens had lasted over the greater part of the journey, and it was the horses that had suffered most, the men would lose no time in slaking their thirst, which had become maddening now that the water was in sight.

The mustang sprung forward, but Devlin had seen the movement of the Indian and having quickened his pace was close at hand.

He caught Gouger by the shoulder and flung him back.

"Hold on a bit, Thomas. If you want the first drink you can have it; but you might as well see what it is you're going to drink. Let up now and hear what's in the wind. What is it, Red Bear? Spit it out."

"Red Bear see talk paper, an' he go slow. Maybe him understand; maybe him don't. Maybe him all hunky dunky, maybe not. See?"

And then Devlin did see the object at which Red Bear pointed.

"A letter, by heavens, posted for any corner to see. Right you are. We'll read it before we drink. It wasn't posted there for nothing, you can bet high on that."

Read it he did, aloud, and this was the terrible thing it was.

#### "NOTICE!

"It is a long two days' march to the next water; if I said differently it was to prepare for something like this. To make the ending of your journey safe I have poisoned this spring. If you drink you die, and if you do not, you will die anyhow—and a good riddance it will be of some troublesome people. I'm sorry for Gouger and his pard, but they must go with the rest. Moreover, they don't want such an accession to their numbers at Eden City. Provisions are scarce there, and I think my welcome will be warmer, and my stay longer, if I come alone. Good-morning."

BARNABAS KAIN.

As Mr. Devlin finished reading this infernal letter, Gertie of the Gulch uttered a short scream, Edna reeled back and fell to the ground, while Tom Gouger gave vent to as hearty a curse as ever had fallen from his lips. At that very instant his horse, which alone of all had been allowed to slake its thirst, reared and then fell with a dying shiver. The words of the false Barnabas Kain were only too true.

#### CHAPTER XXVII.

##### BEFORE THE ALCADE.

"WELL, rocks, I hope I see yer well. (Give us yer paw fur thirty days. I bin er lookin' fur yer, an' I tell yer ther sight now are good fur sore eyes. Shake, ole man, an' you'll do me proud."

"An' who ther thunder be you?"

The second speaker gazed at the first suspiciously, and obstinately refused to extend his paw, in spite of the friendliness of the greeting.

"Oh, I'm a peeligrim, which me name are Draw-an'-plug, ov ther two revolvers. Ef yer don't b'lieve I'm er butcher smell ov me boots. I'm a leetle red-headed bummer, from 'Frisco last, bound fur Eden City an' er racket. Ef I ain't thar I'm fur enough on ther road ter hear ther jawsharps in ther distans. Take me in an' I'll do yer good; but if yer try ther cold shoulder on me—oh, I tell yer, I'm solid death."

"That's the kind we want hyar. We got er grave yard, an' it ain't half full yet. Sav, party, there's no use fur you ter go shootin' off yer lip. Thar sin't no one hyar ez kin be scared, an' ef yer get 'em just er leetle anxious-like they shoot ter kill. I'm er dead medicine myself, but I ain't much good hyar. Ef yer knows what's good you'll turn 'round an' locomote fur some more salubrious shores."

"Don't ruffle up yer hackles so, onless yer means ter put ther gaff on. I ain't meanin' no harm, but war tryin' ter be sociable like. Ye'r ther first human I've see'd fur er week, an' yer handsom phiz did me good. No bluffin' now—I'll tell yer ther honest truth. I'm Santa Fe Sam, ther man with three records, an' hearin' 'uthin' 'bout er big find, I just lit out this hyar way. They call it Eden City, an' they sw'ar whar I come from t'et thar's rocks down hyar. Now ante up an' pass ther buck. How are she, an' what's ther show fur an honest miner ter yarn a livin'?"

"I've got er re-e-cord mesel', an' 'Frisco Frank's me handle. I war one ov ther 'rigonal locaters, an' I hev sand fur thirteen more, so yer needn't try er bluff game. Ef yer wants ter go into this hyar burg, I reckon yer hed better see ther alcade."

"Whar's yer camp, an' whar's yer alcade? Frisco Frank's ther boy that wants everything started with er fair send-off. Santa Fe Sam's ther chicken ez iz ditto. I'm purty nigh wore out now, but ther sight ov ther city'll chirk me right up, an' you'll find me better than I look."

"She's right; down thar. Travel down ther gulch an' ax at ther fust shanty fur Colonel Hard Up. It's kinder dangerous ter interdoose a stranger hyar, an' Santa Fe Sam had better look out fur hisself."

The two men had met on the top of a gentle elevation, coming from opposite sides. They were both of them hard looking cases, and they eyed each other with suspicious caution from the first. To all appearances it would not have taken much provocation to have started a fight between the two, though nothing went to show that they had ever met before.

When Frisco Frank had finished his remarks he turned away, as though he wanted to say nothing more; and Santa Fe Sam, without another word, strode on down the gulch, in the direction indicated.

There was a trace of weakness in his step,

much as he tried to disguise it, and there was an anxious look on his face—the look of a man who had passed through terrible danger and half-expected more in the immediate future. His hands were held near the butts of his revolvers, ready to draw at the drop of a chip, and once or twice he looked back over his shoulder.

The surly denizen of Eden City seemed to have the same spirit of unrest, though a little better disguised.

As neither offered to begin hostilities the two separated beyond pistol-shot without further trouble, and finally the new-comer debouched from the gulch, and a long, deep valley, or canyon, lay before him.

He gave a start of not altogether pleased surprise.

Up to this moment he had not known what to expect, and had more than once fancied that he would find the spot desolate and tenantless, but here was a camp that was almost a town. From the huts and canvas shanties he judged that there were not less than two-score inhabitants, perhaps more.

Surrounded as it was by desert, this oasis would never support a dense population, but it was evident that a good many men had already found their way in, and by another than the long and dangerous one he had just tracked.

But a few rods away there was a shanty that seemed next in size to the largest, and toward this he made his way.

The time was late in the evening, and numerous little columns of smoke announced that the citizens of the burg were engaged in preparing their frugal suppers.

As Santa Fe Sam stopped in front of this shanty he could see that the occupant of it was through with that task, and was just fairly settling down to the work of refreshing the inner man.

The viands were simple, yet toothsome—hard-tack, bacon, and a tin cup of hot coffee. The sight of them made the wanderer smack his lips, with a sound little lower than the crack of a pistol.

Colonel Hard Up, if that was the name of the proprietor of the cabin, heard the sound, and at once threw up his revolver and fired.

Whether he meant to kill or not made no difference—the bullet certainly passed unpleasantly close to the head of the man from Santa Fe, though he had dodged down the moment he saw the offensive motion.

"Hold hard ther!" he shouted, in a voice that did not belong to a frightened, but to a very angry man, and was very different from the one he had lately used. "What in sanctified blazes are you up to? If I hadn't ducked, that would have gone plumb center."

"That's the way we send them 'round here when a stranger comes peekin' about where he don't belong. Better git before I try it again. The next time will be certain death."

"Why, you infernal idiot; you don't mean to try that dodge on me? I'm a stranger am I? Do you want me to cut loose? If I do I'll just wipe this shanty up with your insides, and take you all apart. Speak quick! For half a cent I'd begin on you now."

"Sold ag'in!"

The proprietor of the shanty was not at all angered by the tirade. He thrust back his revolver into his belt, and advanced with a friendly air, quite different from that of a moment before.

"You can swear I didn't know you, or I wouldn't have tried any such tricks. But that's the way things run in this camp. Shoot first—you can't go wrong—and then find out what it's all about afterward. You've come just at an interesting time."

"For supper—yes. I swear I'm half-starved. Sling me out a little of that hard-tack and bacon, and fill me up a tin of coffee. We can talk while I eat, and I see you're about through. But, I say, are you the alcade of this town; and what's the meaning of such fol-de-rol anyhow?"

"I'm that identical cuss, Captain Hard Up, alcade of Eden City; and whether you sneer at it or not, it's not exactly a bed of roses, though it's not as bad as being hung by Vigilantes, or undergoing the little slower process of strangulation at the hands of ordinary justice."

"What do you m an? If there is any trouble here you've either let your men get away with you, which I can hardly think possible, or you've sold out the secret, which I think a thundering sight more likely."

"Neither, my lord; but you can't keep such secrets. The gang were all right. I got them bere over the most infernal route man ever str ck. The diggin's were all right too—and so were the Greasers. It came near being war; and it would have been war if Don Sylvio hadn't taken the drop when we were the most played out crowd of suckers you ever saw. They didn't want to give the secret away any more than we did; but somehow it leaked. They began to come in from the gulf—the don has a schooner that I swear could float right over those hills if there would only be a moderately heavy dew. They found a road where there's only a jornada of about sixty miles; and now blamed if this ain't a regular metropolis."



"And the sand? Does it pan out as I told you? Have you raked in the untold wealth that I could swear was here? Or have you allowed the Greasers—Heaven's lightnings strike them!—to gather it in? There's something rotten somewhere, and I'm here to know what it is. When I didn't hear from you I came through at every risk to see what it was."

"You come mighty light. I suppose you began to think your cats might have got their paws too badly burned to carry your chestnuts. Ha, ha! Not much. You'll find your share in the royal treasury; but it's just as good living here as anywhere, now that business has opened out; and as there ain't a man in our gang who hasn't a price on his head, and as the road-agent lay is pretty near played out further north, we're all content to stay. The fact is, while the diggings last, and grub and whisky can be bought, you couldn't coax us away. The trouble is, the hard work. And now, if your lordship is not too close mouthed, suppose you tell us how the game has gone since your humble servant levanted from the classic regions of Walnut Bar and Poker Flat?"

"Right. Everything has gone right. Or almost everything."

"Then I should judge there had been considerable mortality in the Wheeler family."

"So I hoped—so I believed, until a few moments ago."

"And the dashing Gerie—the girl you claimed as your daughter, and inveigled in from the desert? Is she to be heiress to the filthy lucre that you are accumulating, or going to accumulate?"

For a moment a gloomy look rested on the face of the new comer.

"No child of mine was she, though of my blood. She had to perish with the rest."

"What? How?"

They troubled me, and I led them into the desert and left them there. It was an ugly sort of thing to do; but circumstances were too strong for me. I had more than half intended to bring them through; but the way things have turned out, it is lucky that I didn't."

"And you left Gerie there, too?"

"I did. Why not? The joke of it was, we were all so well disguised that no one dropped to the breadth of the game. I knew them all; but there wasn't one that saw in that maudering idiot, Barnabas Kain, the fascinating road-agent sometimes called Captain Ghoul. There was one of them that did suspect; but he waited a little too long. When I was certain of it, I finished the job and came on alone."

"How?"

And then, in his diabolically cool way, this man of many an alias and many a crime told the story that made even Colonel Hard Up shiver.

When he had finished he added:

"Of course, there's a chance; and till it's certain they won't turn up I shall be particularly careful to know nothing about Barnabas Kain. I knifed the original after I had secured all the information he could give me. Now I am ready to hear by what hocus pocus you come to the front here, where they seem to have held over your hand so nicely. But first tell me, is there a man in camp that goes by the name of Frisco Frank, and if so, who is he?"

"Curse him a thousand times! there is. I know no more of him than you, but he is a man that has worked some trouble in the past, and will work more in the future."

"Then he must die!"

"Amen. But how to take him off? It's been tried."

"It will not take long to arrange that when I get things in running order. Now you can take me out to see some of the boys; and as we go along you can tell me your story and give an account of your stewards' ip."

Colonel Hard Up did not seem particularly charmed at the mention of the latter part of his duties, but he rose up, slipped another cartridge in the place of the one discharged, and led the way from the shanty.

Captain Howard Bascomb—or Santa Fe Sam, as he intended to call himself among the uninitiated—was about to inspect the town.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### A WRAITH FROM THE DESERT.

THE state of affairs at Eden City was as unexpected as it was unpalatable to the new arrival. He had expected to find only a gang of his own creatures; instead, he found a bustling town, that had sprung right up in the desert, but with a better way of access by the gulf line than he had imagined. By some hocus-pocus his tool was the alcalde of this city in miniature; but from what he had learned, Don Sylvio was the real power in the place.

Therefore Bascomb was anxious to see for himself how the land lay. He intended to run things, and he wanted to know where to begin.

"I reckon we may as well take in the House of Hazard at the start. That's the headquarters of wickedness. You'll find them all there during the evening, though it's a little early for the fun to begin."

"Fun? What sort of fun do you have in a place like this?"

"Wait till you see. I tell you this is a rattling little burg. She'll stand at a hundred and forty on the first notch. Here's the spot."

They stopped in front of by all odds the largest shanty in the place.

The sides and roof were of canvas, and if this had not been stretched over a solid frame-work it would have been more like a tent than a house. No doors or windows were there, but they could see the lights gleaming within and the dark shadows of the men, as they walked about behind the translucent walls.

"What a chance to plug a man that you were after! You could lay for him out here in the dark, and no one could tell where the shot came from. I tell you, I could get away with half the town from here; and if they didn't know I'd taken the contract no one would be any the wiser."

"A mighty good show you'd stand of taking the wrong man. How you going to tell who is who through those walls?"

"Hate could see through bricks and mortar. There's Frisco Frank, now. I'm after him, and I may as well begin to make a hole in the canvas."

As he spoke Captain Bascomb deliberately drew, cocked and raised his pistol.

"You fool you!" hissed Hard Up. "Do you want to be hung? You're crazy as a loon on nine wheels. If you want him you've got to do it on the square or you'll have the camp down on us solid. Come inside and get in your work; but you had better go mighty slow about it then."

The interruption came just in time, for Bascomb was in deadly earnest, and his aim seldom lingered. He gave a side stare at his companion, who, at another time would scarcely have dared to brave him.

"You must have raked up a pile here to have got so chicken-hearted. I've seen the time when you wouldn't be so careful about your infernal neck. I'll go for him one way or another, and this might be the safer. Come inside."

Without more delay the two entered.

In spite of the flimsy character of its construction and the absence of windows, the place within looked very much like the regulation saloon of a mining-camp. The interior arrangements were the same; and there was about the same kind of a crowd gathered around, except that there were rather more Mexicans than Bascomb cared to see.

There were faces there that he knew; but the eyes that rested on him gave him no evidence of recognition; and he was satisfied that his disguise was thorough.

"Here's a friend of mine, Santa Fe Sam," said Hard Up, as he brought up in front of the bar. "He's just run the rifle and wants to come in on the ground floor. Set 'em up for the house, sling them out, Pony, and here's the color of his money."

This saloon in the wilderness was the greatest surprise of all—but Bascomb should have known that where thirsty throats stop for stay the barrel comes. The bartender was of the regulation order. He scattered out his glasses with professional skill and gathered in his coin, while the score of thirsty souls ranged themselves along the rude counter, taking an aerial observation through the bottoms of as many glasses after a growled but unanimous:

"Hyar's to yer!"

A few held back; and of them one was Frisco Frank. How he came to have found his way to the House of Hazard ahead of Bascomb was something of a mystery; but there he was, and he took as little account of the new arrival as he had done a couple of hours before, when they met at the head of the gulch.

Bascomb turned on him a quick, fierce glance.

"Party, yer ain't drinkin' with ther crowd. Maybe yer would like ter sample ther liquid lightnin' alone. Ef so don't be bashful. Ther jug's up, ther handle's towards yer, an' ther drink's paid fur. Hit her five fingers if yer choose. Nobody's lookin'."

"Thankee fur nothin'. Frisco Frank bez his private barr', an' ain't drinkin' with every galoot that hollers fur ther house."

Every one looked from "Santa Fe Sam" to Frisco Frank, and back again. There was a shrewd suspicion, at once, that there was no love between these men, and that the probabilities were that war would have to be declared if both remained in that camp.

Colonel Hard Up stood a little on one side, drumming idly on the bar. When he saw, now and then, an interrogative glance in his direction, he made a motion that looked like a secret sign.

After that there were more who knew on which side they were expected to range themselves when the hat dropped.

"I'm a stranger, hyar; an' me only friend is me old side pardner, Colonel Hard Up; but he'll tell yer ef I ain't a good man ter tie to. I'm just ez meek ez any lamb when yer comb my wool the right way; but when yer stroke it ag'in' ther grain I occasionally pull an' plug, an' pays er nigger fur diggin' another hole in my private bone yard. I allus cleans up my work, I does; so ef yer really wants ter rile me just

nominate ther lines yer want on yer tombstone, an' when ther rush is over I'll hev a man down from 'Frisco straight to chalk it fur yer."

"I ain't bankerin' after tombstones; an' I don't keef fur an end place in yer graveyard," responded Frisco Frank, moodily. "I don't keef ter fight; but I won't drink."

"I've hearn ov a crawfish," retorted the other bitterly, "but I hed ter walk from Shasta hyer ter see one. I'm a new man hyer, an' don't want ter put on frills; but I say, ef ther boys know what's good fur ther burg, they'll fire yer out."

An assenting murmur went around from mouth to mouth, of two-thirds of the people there.

What business had Frisco Frank to put an insult upon the new-comer if he did not intend to furnish satisfaction?

A man that won't drink with the house must give his reasons, and then back them solid.

"Thar's some things I kin stand, an' some ez I can't. I kin take yer lip, now, fur instans, acos' I'll never raise band ag'in' yer, ef I kin help it, until I know what yer left behind yer on ther trail! After that—I'll kill yer, sure."

The words were a genuine surprise, and the last sentence burst out as though it came in spite of himself.

Yet there was no question about the hate that, for an instant, blazed in the eyes of Frisco Frank. Colonel Hard Up, who was watching the interchange of words with interest, was as certain as could be that these two men were no strangers, though he was fairly puzzled.

No such man as Frisco Frank had he ever seen outside of Eden City, nor did he know of Captain Bascomb ever having met him, though he thought he knew something about that worthy's friends and foes.

For the first time the idea struck him that this man might be in disguise. If that was so, he was dangerous, and, as likely as not, he himself had more reason to abate him than he had supposed. Heretofore he had viewed him as an intruder that was inconveniently handy with his weapons; and the fact that he now seemed so loth to use them, now made him an object of suspicion.

"He has more sand than he shows," the colonel muttered to himself, "and if he's down on the captain he can say a thing or two about me. If the chance comes, I'll save trouble and plug him from my pocket. It's a risk, but I'll take it."

His hand dropped downward, and his eyes glanced over the space that intervened between him and Frisco Frank. He wanted half a dozen to be in front of him, but he wanted an opening between them.

"Bascomb was right: I should have left him go. He knew what he was about, and there's no one here who would have chipped in very heavy for him. Ah! I think I'll take him row."

"Hold!" said a voice at his side, in a deep undertone. "The Alcade of Eden City must not think of murder. There will be a new election soon if he does. Take your hands off!"

With a muttered curse Colonel Hard Up did as he was bidden, for right at his side stood a tall, dark young man, with a forbidding face, and who gave his command in the tone of one who expected to be obeyed. The speaker was the Don Sylvio who, of all in the camp, was the only man at Eden City that could make the colonel hesitate.

"Fair play we will have. If not, some one shall die," the don continued, in his earnest way. "The man is nothing to me, but he is alone here, and only one man shall attack him, or there must be a settlement with me."

"Correct you are. I wouldn't touch him for a dollar. But he's picked a riot with my friend, and if Sam gets away with him—no nonsense about it, then."

"If he gets away from him—no."

There was a difference in that, but Colonel Hard Up said no more. He understood the platform he was standing on, and that was enough.

Meantime the trouble on hand was growing, for the amiable interchange of words had by no means ceased while the colonel was meditating on interference, and Frisco Frank reiterated his threat.

"You'll kill me—with a shot in ther back. That settles it. I asks these hyar men ef I hain't ther call after that. This hyar camp won't be big enuf arter that fur us two, an' one ov us hes got ter leave on ther huff er on a shutter."

"Ye'll look a long time afore yer finds a shutter," answered Frisco Frank, uneasily. "An' I ain't so anxious ter part company with ther man I've got an eye on. We'd better draw out on this deal, bunch ther keards, an' try it ag'in when I hear from above."

"That's about once too often. I've heerd all ther chin music I kin stand. Put up, shut up, er I'll lead yer out by ther ear. You've run ag'in' yer boss, an' yer feel it in yer bones."

As Bascomb spoke he made a step forward, his one hand extended, as though he was about to make good his threat.

A chorus of scornful laughter went up from the clan of Colonel Hard Up.



The man they had hesitated to tackle seemed to have the heart of a chicken, after all.

That laugh touched Frisco Frank at last.

From behind his matted beard the color leaped up to his very eyes, and with a quick dash, that every one recognized as the style of an artist, his hand sought and caught the handle of the revolver at his belt.

A dozen saw the movement, who did not see that almost instantaneously the fingers unclasped again. Some were springing out of range, while others turned their eyes on Santa Fe Sam, whose prowess was, as yet, a thing of conjecture.

As for Bascomb, he had the chance he aimed for, and though he saw that Frisco Frank had changed his mind, he never hesitated, or altered his.

Up from his hip rose his revolver, the hammer flying back as it came.

He had his chance for the drop, and was taking it. If he could hit the side of a barn he could drill Frisco Frank.

And then, just as the hand came swinging up, and Frisco Frank stood unarmed but unflinching, and the nerves of every man tingled with the thought of what was to happen next, a voice rung out sharp and sharp:

"Hold hard!"

And at the same time, like a gleam of light, a shimmering thing came shooting across the room.

Then came a sudden "chug."

Just as Frisco Frank stepped aside, and from range, the twelve-inch blade of a bowie-knife pierced through the sleeve of the false Santa Fe Sam's pistol arm and pinned it tight to one of the uprights of the House of Hazard.

"When I cut loose," continued the warning voice, "I generally pin 'em up ter dry. I'm Peaceable Pete, the man with seven lives, and I want ter take a hand in this game. Deal me five, and let the sport begin."

And with a knife uplifted in either hand, Peaceable Pete strode forward, while Captain Bascomb, for once startled out of his self-possession, cowered back, with the knife still in his sleeve.

At the same time the hammers of half a dozen revolvers clicked spitefully.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### LOST GERTIE.

"Both bowers and the ace against us," remarked Mr. Devlin, calmly. "I should consider that we were euchered."

"That is the breadth of it," responded Dane Darringer. "It's not worth while to bother with the turn—we lost our hotel on the previous deal. If ever a party was in hock there are the chickens."

Then the two men looked at each other in an inquiring way, as if each hoped that the other had some suggestion to make.

It was not possible to mistake the silent response that each met. Though, for the sake of the two girls, neither cared to speak bluntly; yet there was no mistaking the fact that there was no visible or known way out.

For once Tom Gouger, after his first burst of exasperation, had nothing to say; and Huckleberry, his echo, was silent.

The four did look at Red Bear with a momentary gleam of hope. He stood erect, scanning his surroundings with an inquisitive eye.

He understood, and shook his head gravely.

"Red Bear dunno land. Him away from home. If white friends try trail, him hold him hand right along. If they go under, him chip in on same deal. Allee same, hunky dunky!"

Then he sat down quietly, and resigned himself to waiting.

Yet there was little time to waste; and it began to be certain that unless a movement was soon made it would be hard to force some of the horses away from the poisoned spring.

Devlin turned to Gertie, at last.

"You have heard more than any of us of the course. Here we dare not linger, and if what that villain says is true it will be death to go on. Yet, if you have nothing to suggest go on we must, and run the chances. If I was alone I would not hesitate; with you two to care for I want to make no mistakes."

"Go on, then," answered Gertie. "My rash scheming has brought me into this strait; and with me I have involved another. For her sake I regret most of all, but it is too late for regrets. Forward! Eden City lies yonder—somewhere. We will reach it or die."

"An' we'll reach it—an' when we does, ther'll be a dead Barnabas Kain."

"If you think that you'll ever see the worthy Jew again you've more faith in appearances than I thought was in a man of your inches. Barnabas Kain died last night. Whether the man in his shape that was resurrected will be living or dead I can't say; you won't find him very soon. But I'll bet if you could see him you would go for him now. Come on then. We may find him; and after this I don't mind trusting you and Huckleberry. Unless I miss your measure you've got a new reason, and a sound one, for wanting to see Eden City."

"An' us on the quar'," chimed in Huckleberry.

"An' us on the quar'," chimed in Huckleberry.

won't rest till we hev a knife in his throat. Tom an' me kin ride spell an' spell, an' git thar ahead ov the hearse. You've got two solid pards now, ef ver on ther war path fur Barnabas Kain."

So the council settled it; and with thirst still unslaked they pulled away from the spot, the girls once more brightening with reviving hope.

They rode doggedly on, and the night came down deeper and darker. The horses stumbled now and then, and dragged their feet wearily along, but they made very little noise. They might almost have been a troop of ghosts.

And then, in the dim light, they saw the figure of a shadowy horseman, right in front of them, barring the way.

"It's him, by mighty," chuckled Tom Gouger, and up went his pistol.

Was it Barnabas Kain on the back track? Surely he would not come back to what he must know would be certain death.

Just in time Dane Darringer turned and caught Gouger by the wrist.

"Nothing of that. If it's Kain we'll leave him to drink his own broth, and we'll see that he takes a dose. If it's a stranger, he may point us the way to safety. Hark!"

Gertie gave a cry and suddenly urged her horse forward.

"Ephraim!" she exclaimed, and rode toward the silent phantom, making a backward motion of her hand as she went.

"Saved," cried Edna. "He has come to guide us."

It was indeed the strange half-hermit of the trail, who, with Johanna, had occupied the hut against the hill, and who, having known Gertie in her younger days, seemed now so greatly influenced by her.

She met him without fear, and with extended hand.

"Why did you not guide me when I sought to have you with me? You knew it all, and yet you trusted me to the mercy of the desert, which was savage; and the mercy of man, which was more savage still. We are very near to death; can you save us?"

Ephraim looked as though he did not more than half understand her.

"There is the way," he said, pointing along the intended course of their trail. "Go if you want."

"But to go on is to die. The spring we have left behind us is poisoned. Before we can reach the next we will perish."

"Poisoned?" said Ephraim, vaguely. "How?"

"A villain—one that you know—was with us as a seeming guide. I would have been rid of him if I could, but he clung to us until we were lost beyond redemption, as he thought, dodged us in the night, reached the water before us, and poisoned the pool. One horse that drank perished before our eyes. We are dying. Can you save us, or must you fail with us?"

"I can save you," he said.

The two had dropped the Indian dialect.

"When your horse drops mine carry two."

"But I cannot leave them—I will not."

"Let them follow."

"No, I will not go unless Edna is with me."

The magnificent spirit of the girl had been somewhat broken, or she never would have even temporized. It was only Edna's request that kept the others back while the two held their interview.

Even that influence could avail no longer.

Gouger and Huckleberry began to creep forward.

No dependence was there to be placed upon them. If the stranger had a fresher mustang they would murder him for it in a minute.

Devlin and Darringer ranged forward too.

Then Ephraim gave a cry, such as Edna had heard when he stopped the coach—only it was hoarser and fiercer.

Unzainly though he might look he moved now like a flash.

His other arm shot out and encircled her waist, sweeping her like a feather from her own saddle across to a place in front of him. Then, catching the bridle rein of her mustang, he pressed his own animal with his knees, and was away—not on the trail for Eden City as he had pointed it out, but almost at right angles.

Gertie, too, gave one cry of surprise. Then she remained silent; and the gripe around her waist held her as in a vise.

The fresher mustang, even though doubly weighted, could more than hold its own; and still holding the captive girl in his arms, Ephraim forged rapidly ahead.

"That's the last of your gentle damsel," said Darringer, as he pressed spurs to his mustang and ranged closer to Devlin.

It was not that he was not shocked by the unexpected ending to the play; but he spoke according to his way, that was hard to drop at a moment's notice.

"Perhaps," answered Devlin, more deeply moved and between his teeth. "But if all she told was the truth he knows this desert from the ground up, and he'll run into no danger. He'll head for water; and if we can keep the trail we'll get there too, if it is shortly after. The beast has the heels of us now, that's certain."

"But the girl! will she come to harm? If I thought she would I'd try a shot on him here, if I killed th m both."

"Hold hard. I could throw his mustang easy enough; but we must keep him going. What devil notion he has in his head now—he is mad for the girl, but has always kept his place—I don't know; but he has Walter Devlin behind him to track him to the death, if need be."

"Ah! You have known her before. She has been an old-time friend."

"Rather," said Mr. Devlin, shortly; and then Darringer's queries ceased. The two kept their eyes fixed upon the receding figures.

On through the night the chase swept; and Devlin felt sure that not only could Ephraim have dropped them completely, had he been so disposed, but that he was deliberately leading them. Whether it was with good or evil intent remained to be proved.

Close at Devlin's heels kept the Indian, silent and watchful. He was ready to take up the trail if the others failed.

"Stream come up ag'in, outer sand. Find heap good water soon," he said, at length. "Red Bear feel it in him bones. But no keten him girl this time. Good by, John! Eh?"

The phantoms in front had disappeared.

"You're right. They'll have time to drink and be off unless the girl makes a fight for it. But we won't be far behind 'em."

"Red Bear see um all plain now; take um lead. Hunky dunky boy from High Pine!"

Away dashed the red-man; and straight enough did he lead the way. Barnabas Kain—or Captain Bascomb, as it may be best to call him—with all his knowledge of the plain, did not know it as well as the wandering Ephraim, or else did not dream that they would dare deflect from the only course on which they had any assurance of safety.

Nor would they have done so but for the unexpected meeting.

So Devlin and the rest now followed the Red Bear; and he led them straight to the water that Ephraim had left not ten minutes before. His trail was there just at the pool, but beyond that no sign nor trace did he leave, and when they listened all was silent.

"Now what?" asked Dane Darringer, a few moments later.

"Straight fur Eden City," answered Gouger, speaking first of all. "Thar's er leetle bit ov settlement me an' my pard's got ter make. Ther man what led us inter a snap bez got ter die. Go your road, ef she lies different; but Huckleberry an' me strikes yonder."

"One way is as good as another, unless we stay here till morning. You had better lay up with us a little. If you go on foot-back a rest won't hurt; and maybe to-morrow we can spell around with you so as to make it better."

"Our way's over thar," replied Gouger, doggedly. "I can't git tired, er thirsty, er layed out—I'm a-huntin' a man. When I find him, chalk up a notiss fur a fun'ral."

"An' I reckon I'll go along," interposed Peaceable Pete. "I want ter be ore of ther fust in at Eden City. Ef ary thing happens, an' thar ain't er straight, clean story about it, yer know whar ter look fer ther trouble."

"But you won't desert the girl?"

"Ef we don't strike her between hyar an' Eden City—ef ther are sich a place—it won't help much hangin' round ter starve. We must hev er fresh start on er full grub sack; and that's my platform."

"And a sound one it is, but I'd give ten thousand in cash if I didn't have to stand on it. There is no use after all. Miss Wheeler must not be led into a death-trap. Wait until the mustangs breathe a bit, and fill up. Then we can all go together."

"Do as you choose," added Darringer. "But I'm not going to leave handsome Gertie in the lurch if it kills me. Go on if you choose; but I stay here till morning, and then follow the trail."

"Red Bear chip in on that same. Him never go inter Eden City till um find Gertie."

So these two staid behind, while, after a short halt, the rest went plodding on.

## CHAPTER XXX.

### POCKET JIMMY COMES TO GRIEF.

It looked like a waste of time, if not simple bravado, to willingly linger there in the desert.

Yet Darringer seemed to feel himself personally responsible for the safety of Gertie of the Gulch—why, it would have been hard for him to have explained—and he remained, with Red Bear as a companion, while the others went plodding on.

"Do you think you can make it?" he asked, carelessly. "It will be a blind sort of a trail to follow; but we've got to read it out. But it would be the joke of the season if they had gone straight on. There's no counting on what that idiot will be up to."

"Can't find um trail by moonlight, but when sun rise be all hunky dunky. Red Bear trail flea in a chaparral with three weeks' start. Ugh!"

"Quite likely," said Darringer, dryly, and lighting a cigarette he threw himself upon the ground. There was little in common to serve the two as a subject for conversation, and, when the cigarette was finished, Dane Darringer closed his eyes and went to sleep.



Bright and early the two were up, however, taking their frugal meal from the rapidly lightening haversacks in the first gray of the morning.

Then they moved forward a short distance and cast about them.

It was not hard to find the footprints of their own party; but if Ephraim had had opportunity and desire, no doubt he would have come near to baffling even the keen-scented Sioux.

As it was, for a time the two believed that it might have been wiser to have followed the rest.

If there had been any trail left by Gertie and her abductor, it seemed to have been swallowed up and lost in the numerous hoofprints of Davlin's party.

Then Red Bear, coming back toward the water-pool, made another throw—and won. His eyes fell upon a faint impression, and his face brightened as he pointed.

"Red Bear look where um trail hard to find. Ketch him sure. G. slow till him got her flue. See?"

With nose down, almost as if he followed by scent, the Indian hurried along for some little distance.

Then he beckoned.

"Trail lead back to other spring. Kin risk her leetle way, but Red Bear don't like 'er looks to go far. E?"

"Correct you are. I've come out to see a circus in the wilderness, and I'll take it all in, side-show and the regular chances. Lead out as far as you'll care to risk it, and then we'll toss to double or quit."

The trailer nodded and went ahead confidently, while Darringer followed at an easy pace. Too much of a start had the fugitives for Darringer to expect to overhaul them speedily. It would take a long and steady march if the flight was prolonged, as it seemed likely to be. The question was, whether he would dare to follow where Ephraim led.

As they went on they began to see more and more plainly that the trail would take them to, or very close to, the poisoned pool. Whether that fact had any meaning remained to be proved. Ephraim must know; and yet what mad thing Ephraim might do was a matter of serious conjecture. If the notion seized him he might choose to end his life then and there.

This idea troubled Dane Darringer more and more as he found the course to lie directly toward the dreadful little hollow.

"Surely he's not mad enough to try to take her through on the back trail? It will be certain death if he does. Her horse will fail, his won't carry two, and then it will be good morning Mr. Buckley. I don't like the looks of this a bit. We'll know in a few minutes, though; and I don't care how soon the agony's over."

So he was thinking as they neared the spot; and he looked ahead to catch the earliest possible glimpse of the fugitives, if they were still lurking by the poisoned pool.

Red Bear came to a sudden halt and pointed; while Darringer uttered an exclamation of surprise, that was not altogether of satisfaction.

They were there; and they had drunk in spite of their knowledge.

So, at least, it seemed, for there, by the side of the water hole, lay three horses; and by the horses two human forms, one of which moved convulsively at that moment.

And then there came a terrible groan.

Under a sharp pressure of the heel Darringer's mustang sprang forward.

But no Ephraim and no Gertie was there here.

A man of herculean frame lay stretched where he fell, with clinched fists and open eyes, that, in spite of the ghastly glaze upon them, seemed to be staring straight upward. Near him was a light figure, clad in a garb that might be mistaken at first glance for that of a woman.

Yet this was not Gertie of the Gulch; nor was it a female form, though whether it belonged to boy or man it was hard to say.

As Darringer reined in there came another groan; and what seemed to be a lad of seventeen or eighteen raised weakly to his feet.

"Ah, you are coming! Help me! I die! Look! Oh, I am burning; within is all fire. Carry me out of this valley of death."

Darringer slid deliberately off of his horse, taking good care to keep the bridle well over his arm, so that the animal could not by any chance reach the water.

The young man did present a frightened as well as a frightful appearance. His face showed pale through all the bronze of sun and wind, and his eyes were wild and blood-hot.

"Don't stand there like a bump on a log," he continued. "If you are white do something for me. I tell you I won't die—I can't die—I ain't fit to die. Help me away from here!"

He staggered, fell, and then looked up at Dane Darringer with the glare of a sorely wounded wolf in his eyes.

"I'm supposed to be white," said Darringer, coolly, "but I usually help only white men. And I'm afraid you're done for anyway. Let's hear who you are. Your face looks familiar somehow. And this mountain of cold meat—he

looks like some one I've had dealings with. Upon my soul I believe it's my gentle friend of the panthers—the road-agent who started the trouble at a quarter of nine. But who are you?"

"I'm Jimmy Hurley, of Cactus Fork; and a miserable sinner. Are you going to leave me here? Oh, you haven't the heart of a man. You are a devil. I've got rocks, too, nigh to a thousand dollars. I'd give it all to be out of this."

Jimmy Hurley's plaint went from the sublime of pathos down to the ridiculous; but there was no doubt he was in terrible earnest.

"See here, young man, if I do my best to see you through, would you make a clean breast of it, and tell me what you know and how you got here?"

"All that I know," groaned Hurley.

"I guess I'd better take your confession first; but swallow this to hold you up a little while you mention your tale."

Darringer produced cup, canteen and flask, and with some deliberation mixed a little whisky and water, which he held to Hurley's lips.

"Now go on," he said. "Let us hear what you are doing here, and mind—lies don't go down."

"I tell you I am Jimmy Hurley, of Cactus Fork. I heard a thing or two about the big find, and I wanted to get there. The boss knew the road, and he started. Then I dropped on his trail and followed. If I had got to Eden City, I'd have been as good a man as he is, and my own man."

"And who may the 'boss' be?"

"How can I tell? He was just the boss, though he had a dozen names. Captain Bascomb they called him at Cactus Fork, and the Judge up at the Flats."

"I've heard of him. He had a very killing way about him?"

"Yes, when they didn't fork over on time. He was Captain Ghoul on the north road. Buck Kerrigan was in his party, and so was Burro Bill, and a dozen others that I could name. But what's the use? I'm dying here, and you won't help me."

His voice dropped into a more miserable whine than ever.

"Just one more question, and then I promise I will do what I can. Who was the dear departed? What had you to do with him?"

"He was a bad one. Burro Bill they called him at Cactus Fork and with the boss's gang, but sometimes he paddled his own canoe, and then he went to supper with another handle. I met him on the road with the dog-gonedest pets. Ugh! It broke me all up. Three tigers. But what could I do? He said he was going my way and would take me through. When he came to where the red niggers were piled up—whew! didn't he swear. He was after everybody, and most of all two young sports and a girl. He had trouble laid out for them, but it failed to connect. It may be over now, but if he had lived you bet it would have come anyhow."

"When he found them?"

"Yes; but he knew what they were up to, and he said the boss had followed the same road. They were all bound to Eden City. So I chipped in with him, and this is the end of it."

"It strikes me you're not as bad as you once were. Don't you seem to be getting stronger? I wouldn't wonder if you were more scared than hurt."

"There's no hurt at all; but I'd have died if I hadn't crawled out here."

Hurley plucked up momentary spirit, which Darringer noticed, and smiled.

"There's no foolishness about 'the boss,' as you call him. He dropped enough poison in that spring to kill an army. You couldn't have had a very big dose or you would have been dead before now."

"Is that so? Hurrah! I thought it was in the air. When Bill dropped I caught him, and it made me sick. I'm all right—I didn't drink at all."

"Well, for a man of your profession, you have a thundering big imagination."

Darringer spoke with an accent of regret; but Jimmy Hurley did not notice it. Overjoyed, he clapped his hands, and looked like a new man. He no longer feared the seemingly mysterious plague.

"Ah, he's ready to drop us now, is he; and wants to put the gang where they can't give him trouble. Curse him, when I make my strike down in the sand at Eden City I'll plug him one for good luck."

From the depth of despair to the top round of expectation was only one bound for Pocket Jimmy.

"My friend, you don't seem to recognize the fact that you're alone in the desert without horse or guide and a long road to travel. We don't want you, and if we did we couldn't do you much good. Don't yell so loud until you're out of the wood. I wouldn't give three cents for your chances. Come on, Red Bear; there's no time for fooling here."

Darringer mounted his mustang, and the Indian, who had never spoken a word, ranged up to his side.

"Over yonder, somewhere, lies Eden City, and it's a two days' ride to the nearest water. If you get through, let me know. My post-office address will be Cactus Fork."

"But you ain't going to leave me here, are you? Stop! You sha'n't. I won't have it!" Hurley dropped his hand to his belt. In a twinkling he recognized the situation, and was again desperate.

"None of that," responded Darringer, sternly. "We can't be burdened with you on foot, and where we go you would be only in the way. It's a hard thing to do, but we will have to leave you."

Hurley prayed, and Hurley threatened in one breath; but Darringer turned away.

Then, as if by an after-thought, he faced suddenly in his saddle, but with his hand out, holding his revolver—and just in time.

Pocket Jimmy was ready for slaughter, and his weapon was drawn.

"I guess, after all, it will be more convenient to kill you, though I'm open for a bargain yet. Tell me the red rock truth about your trip; and I'll put you up to the only chance there is left for you."

"Done, pard, I'll give it away. Here's the document, I was to carry to Bascomb. That's gospel truth. Now, play me fair, I know nothing more."

He extended a paper as he spoke, and Darringer took it from his unresisting hand, and tore it open.

"To Howard Bascomb, Cactus Fork;—

"Your brother has escaped. If my vengeance fails let yours fail. Look for him in Eden City. JOHANNA."

The brief letter was written in a strange, cramped hand; but one that was not hard to decipher.

"Humph!" said Darringer. "I know something more, though not much; but I guess you have told the truth. I will give you a drink from my canteen, then put you on the trail we made coming here. Go on till you find water, and then turn again northwest by north and the devil go with you."

A few questions that Hurley asked were answered, and then Darringer and Red Bear went carefully along the trail which they found once more, and Pocket Jimmy, aloof and alone turned aside to find the uncertain path to which he had been directed.

When Darringer and the Indian had gone some little distance they noticed an addition to the trail.

The tigers, that seemed to have been none too well attached to their master, had deserted his body before it was yet cold.

Perhaps Ephraim and his captive had passed about that time and they had followed him. Darringer had heard several things lately, and put them all together.

If that was the case he had to regret the lost time at the pool. The letter he had wrung from Pocket Jimmy seemed like poor pay for the waste of valuable moments.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

### THE TRAIL TO THE CHAPARRAL.

"Go slow, him all hunky dunky."

Red Bear held up his finger, and uttered his warning in a whisper.

The two had traveled many miles since they had left Jimmy Hurley at the poisoned pool; and though they had been more fortunate than they could have hoped for in the blind chase they looked rather the worse for wear.

They were just at the edge of the chaparral that stretched right across their way as they debouched from a valley or pass between two bare, bleak mountains of sand.

"Slow it is; but I don't think we've reached the end of our trail yet. From the lay of the landmarks Eden City must lie over yonder; and after all this folderol they're going to make a straight run for it."

"Maybe so, maybe not; but Red Bear see um point to strike fur water. Can't go much farder, an' he feared find bad medicine there. See two squaw track. Don't understand. Want um look 'round mighty keeful. This no like country him know but he bold him hand."

"I'd like to know what the infernal whelp is after, Red Bear. If he's his friend we've got to touch him lightly. If he's not I want to shoot on sight. Honest I-jun—what do you think?"

"No tell; that why want um crawl up slow. Bet um bottom dollar got um corraled at last. Wait here; Red Bear go ahead an' look."

"And about the time it gets black dark how do you expect to find me again, where everything's much of a muchness? No. We had better stick together. I might leave my mustang though and trust to chances."

"Red Bear say him come back, him come unless him go under. Dark or light allee samee. Lay low here an' wait fur good news. Both go; panther bear 'em come an' gouge 'em all up."

It was evident enough that the Indian preferred to carry on his investigations alone; and if the rescue was not to be done by a sudden dash and an attack to kill, his was the better plan, since, with the brute sentinels that the fleeing Ephraim seemed to have, it would be



ward to effect a surprise without more consummate strategy than Darringer was master of.

At the same time it would go hard with them if they could not finish their work and strike out quickly for that oasis which they confidently expected to find.

Though the nature of the country had changed, and they had left behind them the isolated mountains, surrounded by the arid, waterless plain, yet the chaparral before them was none the less inhospitable and desolate, so far as they could view it. Within, or beyond its recesses, there might be something not yet dreamed of; but it was dangerous to experiment; and here was an unpleasant spot in which to be left alone.

Yet Darringer yielded finally. Himself screened from observation in the deep shadows, he saw the Indian almost immediately disappear in the darkness; and imagined that it would be long enough before Red Bear would find his way back. He had not yet sufficient confidence in his own trail craft to trust to the wisdom of others.

Red Bear was troubled with no such doubts. He glided away with a confident step, and threaded the mazes of the chaparral like one who was at home.

"Bet, um find camp byer. What else?—that not easy conunjurum. Mebbe camp find Red Bear. That bust him all up. Eh? go 'long slow. Almost bin there now. Hear um sure."

The Indian halted, with his lips closed tightly as though he feared that an audible sound might escape them.

He heard with his ears, and not with his mouth, as some men half seem to do.

His nose helped him, too, for he could detect a faint trace of smoke in the heavy night air.

But most of all, he noted the barely-heard murmur of voices that assured him that he had not been mistaken.

"No wind, no under-brush to tread on, no light to see um. Red Bear make um rattle if 'em be in wood. Find out, sure, if um tigers don't pull 'em down. Ugh!"

He loosened the knife in his belt, so that it would be ready to his grasp in case of need, and then once more crept silently forward, taking careful note of his course, but guided by the murmur, which seemed low rather from distance than from any caution of the speakers.

Who would imagine that there was danger of eavesdroppers in that desolate and almost inaccessible spot?

And who would have imagined how far sounds would be carried in the stillness of the night?

Even Red Bear was at fault in that respect, though it gave him a lesson in caution, little as he needed one.

Long after he had passed over the distance that he thought lay between him and the talkers he heard the voices still ahead of him, though the tones grew louder, and he could distinguish that two persons were having what seemed to be a wordy altercation.

One thing was certain. As he crept nearer he was certain that he could feel water near.

If he was not mistaken in that he would find those of whom he was in search near to it, and from that he could almost fancy their positions, and the lay of the ground.

At length he could distinguish the words quite plainly, and still pressing on he saw, at last, a faint glow of light, and understood why it was that he had not been able to distinguish it sooner.

Right well was the little fire hidden. It lay below him, and yet in a recess behind a small ledge of sand, and was kept up for its light, which fell fairly and squarely on the few figures before it.

Ephraim had at last been run to earth; but with him Red Bear found more than Gertie.

He looked a moment, and listened.

Then he tapped his forehead lightly with his fingers, and thought to himself:

"All mad together."

No wonder, for before him was Johanna.

Always weird, the woman was now flaming.

"Poor fool!" she said. "Why do you plead for her? What is she to you? Let her die now; and when we meet him he must die too."

"No, Gertie Ephraim's friend. He want her for long time and she come not. Now he have her and keep her. Without her care not to live. If she die kill him too. Both go together, who want to live?"

"I thought that way once; but I have lived to hate. I played too long and he broke away when I thought I had him safely where I had held him so many months. You cannot keep her, poor fool, and one day she will rise up and strike you down."

"What Ephraim care? He knows her from child, and cares for her. They play together. He tame tigers for her. Bad man come and take tigers away and Gertie too. He thought he would die. He find her once, twice, and world seem bright; but he let her go because Johanna want him help keep man in cave. That man not her father. Him get away, and go across desert. We follow. But Ephraim looked for Gertie. He found her and bring her here. Then we get other girl and Johanna say

both must die, and then go on to get father again. Kill squaw in men's clothes if choose, but Gertie lives for Ephraim. She be queen of desert. When Spotted Feather and his braves come down and sweep away Eden City, then he can dig the sand for her they all seek for, make her rich. Make her queen; but Ephraim must have Gertie."

The woman was silent as he rambled on. She heard, yet scarcely seemed to note; but when he paused for a moment she broke in:

"What can she be to you, poor blind idiot? She would deceive you worse than she did Spotted Feather, when, to save the life of him who professed to be her father, she made the Apache believe that she would willingly be his squaw. What is gold to her, in the desert; and what could you be to her, there or elsewhere? Oh, you are mad, madder than I, who have been crazed these many years."

"But Ephraim must have Gertie. He has his tigers back, and he has her back. Go away and leave us in the hills of sand and the thick cactus trees."

Still the same plaint. The man was mad indeed—and Gertie stood there with bound wrists, listening to the two while she shivered with horror. Ephraim was beyond her control now, and she scarcely knew which of the two fates before her, life or death, she would prefer.

The woman was deeply moved but it was to anger.

"You care only for her, of the cursed blood, and forget your mother. You would cheat her of her revenge she swore against all the name. Never. They die—and he dies when I find him again. Now is the time to begin. Stand away!"

Worked up to a frenzy of rage, she pushed past him toward the two girls.

Her movement was quick; but Ephraim's was quicker. As he saw the knife that glittered in her hand, and the fire of insanity that gleamed in her eyes, he, in turn, bounded by her, and flinging his arms around Gertie, raised her from the ground.

"Kill the other one!" he exclaimed, "but Gertie is mine."

With one spring he was beyond her reach; but he left Edna Wheeler just at her hand, and around the girl's throat closed the sinewy fingers, and the knife went up.

No wonder that Red Bear had crouched listening, and hesitating to move; since these two were wild to fight and murder. They were ready, just then, to slay each other; and beyond them, just out of range of the streaming firelight, crouched the figures of three gaunt cougars, ready to rend if they were once launched at a foe.

But now there was no longer time to hesitate.

Up into the air rose a single loud yell, and then he sprang recklessly downward, and with only time to fire one shot as he came.

The bullet struck full and fair into the brain of one of the tigers, but the other two hurled themselves forward, and flung themselves at Red Bear, who grasped one by the throat with either hand.

At his yell, Johanna held her hand and gave the encouraging cry that had launched her tigers. Then, still holding Edna, she gazed over her shoulder at the unequal conflict between man and brutes.

But Ephraim, with Gertie in his arms, whirled and bounded away.

#### CHAPTER XXXII.

##### EDNA'S DANGER.

It was at the best a very blind sort of a trail that Mr. Devlin and his party tried to thread after they had parted from Dane Darringer.

Yet they knew the general bearings of their course and had certain bearings of which they did not altogether lose sight. If their way zig-zagged among the hills, or seemed lost on the plains, they knew that all the time they were winning their way toward the spot where Eden City was supposed to be; and they made their way quite rapidly, and with marvelous good fortune.

Tom Gouger would have been in bad plight though, had not his partner kept his word most nobly. Half the time, at least, he rode; and so, with dogged pertinacity the two men kept up with the party, that perhaps went a shade the slower on their account.

Yet Edna Wheeler suffered most of all, since she was not only troubled on account of the uncertainty of Gertie's fate, but now she felt that she was truly and entirely alone with these men whom she could not and dared not trust.

At last the end seemed near, for they could see before them the gradually rising trend of the pass between the two mountains which lay above and beyond the thick battalions of cactus, which now seemed to almost bar their progress.

Then Devlin dropped back to the side of the girl.

"You wouldn't take my advice, miss, back yonder at Cactus Fork, and a sweet mess we've made of it, though I must confess you've played your hand, such as it was, to the best advantage. I'm not going to offer any particular advice now. What I want to do is to suggest that the danger is all pretty much in front, and we don't know exactly what it is, or maybe, I'm not so sure it would be safe or pleasant for you to go into this camp, if camp there is, until we see how the land lays."

Edna nodded assent. She had thought of this herself.

"But if we could find a safe spot to leave you while we explore the valley that is supposed to lie beyond? We may find it desolate, we may find it peopled with a hundred fiends. It cannot be less safe than this spot—it may be a thousand times more dangerous. What say you?"

Mr. Devlin might be careless enough where his own affairs were concerned; but he could not have neglected those of Edna if he had tried.

"It would not be for long," she answered reflectively. "Yet it is dreadful to stay here alone. You know if you go, there will be no one I could trust—unless it would be the man who calls himself

Peaceable Pete. And he is so uncouth, so desperate that I dare not be with him."

"Don't you fool yourself about Peaceable Pete. He's a rooster; but he's game, and never strikes till he's gaffed and billed. But he will want to go along. It is, however, the fact of your being alone that promises you safety. If anything happens to us, though, your only chance is to take the back track. I think you can find it, though it will be a rough old jaunt. I'll leave you my haversack; and though there's precious little in it, it may help you through the pinch. Come on a little further, and I think I can pick you out a secure hiding place—for I see you have made up your mind."

So, after some further progress had been made, the men went on alone, leaving Edna in the recesses of the chaparral.

Her last words to Mr. Devlin were:

"Mention no names, but if you find trace or sign of James Wheeler or his son, bring them to me."

Perhaps she uttered those words a little louder than was prudent; but she did not think that the chaparral could have ears, or that there was any near danger.

Yet, when the last sound of muffled hoof-beats had died away the danger came.

Her mustang gave her the first warning.

It started suddenly and violently, and acted as though about to break away.

Edna sprang toward it, her first care to secure it, and mount.

If she had thought of defense it might have been better. As she caught at the head of her horse she stumbled; and that minute two hands, slender and bony, though they had a gripe of iron, closed upon her elbows, and from that instant she was powerless in her captor's grasp.

"Ah! You came to me, once, hated one, and I had to let you go from me. Now I have come to you and you shall not go again. Oh, if I could get father and daughter, both! How I hate them! I can slay you here. Your spirit can guard the road to Eden City."

In a moment this captor, whose voice was that of a woman, but whose words sounded like those of a fiend, had disarmed her prisoner.

Then she turned her around, and stared brutally in her face.

Edna saw that she was in the power of Johanna, the woman who once before had threatened what now she was about to execute.

"Oh, you need not struggle, you are in the trap. When the jaws loosen it will be to drop you out a corpse."

Edna did not despair, though her utmost efforts produced no effect.

"Would you become a murderess? What have I ever done to you that you should stain your hands with my blood? See! I am a girl, who never till a day or so ago saw you. I came to your cabin and you received me with threats; but I slept under your roof and ate from your table. Your friend is my friend. How can you meet her again if you harm me now?"

"Ha, ha! When I meet Gertie of the Gulch again it will not be as a friend, but I will come with a knife for her throat. Since then, oh, since then, I have lost all that I lived for, and now I have not torture but death for the whole accursed brood. Gertie is one of the stock, and she too must die."

"Surely, Ephraim would not see her harmed; she trusted to him."

"Ha, ha! Ephraim does as Johanna wills. But you shall see; you shall see; yes, I will not kill you now and here, I have a better plan. Come, you shall go with me, girl."

"And will you take me to Gertie?"

Edna had yet a hope, for she had seen the influence that her young friend had had and could not believe that it was altogether lost. Knowing that resistance was useless she resigned herself to her captor, who did not answer the question, but with a single exertion of strength that would hardly have been looked for in one of her sex she flung Edna upon the mustang and mounted beside her.

"Two sisters!" she exclaimed, and then laughed wildly.

"Ha, ha! They meet after years, and they die together. Oh, I tell you it's all true. The mills grind slow; but they grind small. And Johanna is one of the mill-stones!"

This was the way that Red Bear came to find the two girls together, and this was why they were in such deadly plight. Straight to the spot where Red Bear had found her she had gone, and there Ephraim was waiting, with Gertie as his captive.

Not altogether had Gertie lost her influence over the young man, for he had treated her tenderly and carefully. Only he would not trust her for a moment to herself lest she might fly away.

He wanted to hold, but not harm her; while Johanna was wild to slay.

#### CHAPTER XXXIII.

##### TROUBLE AT THE HOUSE OF HAZARD.

MR. DEVLIN stood in the aperture that served as a doorway for the House of Hazard. He came just a shade behind Peaceable Pete, and it was as well that he did—for the sake of Frisco Frank.

Devlin might not have cared to shoot on sight, and it took prompt work just then and there.

Now he stepped forward, with a revolver in either hand to back the movement, and one barrel was poised directly at Colonel Hard Up.

"Fair play's a jewel," he said, easily, as he advanced, "and if Hard Up, and the rest of their gang, can understand what is goo for them, fair play is what they'll offer. If they don't, I must observe that this shanty will be busted before many minutes, and there won't be enough men left alive to carry the shutters. We'll begin with Hard Up."

The worthy colonel was more than surprised at the mention of his name; but the warning was none too soon. He was edging along to get to the rear of Peaceable Pete, whose eyes he thought were too nearly fixed on him to try a shot from in front.

He would have had his chance in a moment, though.

Now, the two men held the room at bay.

The man with the knives seemed to come like one from the grave.

The captain had shuddered as he thought of Peaceable Pete, but he was with the rest by the side of the poisoned pool.



What sort of man was this? Was he flesh and blood, or a wrath from the desert?

At that moment Bascomb was sufficiently unstrung to give away his identity. He forgot that he was neither Barnabas Kain nor yet Captain Bascomb—that, in looks and name, he was now the genuine, unadulterated Santa Fe Sam, had escaped his mind. He only remembered the terrible reason he had given this man to seek vengeance, and he feared that another minute would bring another knife. The next one would most probably come crashing through his heart.

"You did that nicely, Peter," continued Mr. Devlin, his eyes looking warily around him, as he marked every man that had touched a weapon.

"But let up on this a moment. I have a crow to pick with this gentleman—a large-sized, fully-fledged crow, with the longest tail-feathers you ever saw. I was going to put all that off until later on in the game, but I see it can't be did. Let him down, Peter—let him down, and he and I will talk Spanish a little."

"Down she are. If don't want ter spile yer fun, but if yer knew what's good fur man an' beast ye'd leave him up ter dry."

It was not necessary for Pete to do more than hold his hand. At the implied permission, and at a quiet, but commanding, gesture from Colonel Hard Up, several men advanced. Their bodies covered that of Bascomb, and one of them, reaching forward, jerked the knife from the captain's sleeve.

Bascomb had forgotten Frisco Frank, and he had forgotten the character that he had assumed; but the white, set look was clearing away from his face. He wheeled so as to face Mr. Devlin, though he did not raise his hands. He had caught a glimpse of the knives that Peaceable Pete upheld, and knew that at a motion, one of the blades would come hissing home.

If he had left these men to die in the desert, along with two feeble women who were then there, at least of the crowd that trained behind Colonel Hard Up, who had not done as bad or worse? And why should he hesitate to let his personality be known?

So he faced Mr. Devlin, and his voice grew stronger and stouter as he spoke:

"I'm not the man to deny my record, even if there are men waiting to stab me in the back. You two have chosen to come in here and throw the gauntlet down—do you think Howard Bascomb fears to take it up?"

"A man that will poison a water-hole, and leave two girls to die in the desert, will hardly be afraid to take anything up. All the same, he's got to settle with me."

"And they are all dead, are they?" asked Bascomb, with a sneer.

"If they are not it is not your fault. It has cost Gertie of the Gulch her liberty, if not her life. I know no more where she is than you do. And yet one day you chose to claim her as your daughter, and such she believed herself to be. As for Edna Wheeler—that you should seek her death I can understand. She might one day be in your way, and you would not hesitate to strike at her life on the next opportunity. I'll stop that here, and now."

A hush fell upon the crowd. Bad as they were, these charges staggered them. At that moment Bascomb had but few friends, and they only tied to him by the bands of crime.

Yet the captain neither winced nor flinched. He could be as cool as Mr. Devlin any day. Just now, if anything, he was the cooler.

"You have named your time; now let us hear the way. Your words are a tissue of lies, and there is only one way to meet them. These men, strangers as they are, will see that everything is fairly done."

"An' ef thar's ary one of 'em ez wants ter git inter this game, he kin deal me a hand, an' I'll put rocks on me keards thet I hold over him. Say! 'Fair an' squar', two ag'in' two—who wants ter chip in?"

Peaceable Pete glared around him, and then came an answer, short and sharp, as Frisco Frank took up the challenge.

"That's my name. It didn't suit my game ter tackle this hyer galoot. But thar's no discount on my nerve, an' hyer's ther tools that backs it."

He jerked out his weapons as he spoke; but, as they came, he aimed one of them fairly and squarely at Howard Bascomb, while the other covered Mr. Devlin.

In his way he had taken the drop.

"Ah!" said Peaceable Pete, and, as another knife left his hand, Colonel Hard Up flung himself at the man with the bowies. Then came pistol-shots and the darkening of the room with smoke, through which the men plunged to come to closer quarters.

And then, right in the midst of it all, there arose, without, a wilder yell than any that had been heard within, and the ringing noise of shouts and shots. Then a man sprung through the passageway, pistol in hand.

"Hold hard, hyar!" he shouted as he came. "Hyar's ther bloody red-skins, an' they come fur ha'r!"

At that warning cry the combatants fell apart again, peered through the drifting smoke, listened, and were still.

No child's play was that charge that was swirling along without, but the rush of an army.

The war in the House of Hazard ceased as if by magic; there was a foe against which friend and foe could join, and did join.

Of what avail their resistance would be remained to be seen.

#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

##### SURRENDERED ON PAROLE.

"EASY, Ephraim, it's a long time until morning, and I wouldn't hurry."

As Ephraim, with Gertie in his arms, was hurrying from the spot, Dane Darringer arose right in front of him, and slung out his right fist and shoulder.

He did not care to kill or he would have used a weapon; but the young hermit dropped as promptly as though he had a bullet through his brain.

Then Darringer, whose movements were as prompt as they were powerful, leaped at Johanna with a panther-like bound, his knife in his hand.

She had seen Ephraim go down, and now, dropping Edna, she turned to face him.

"Ha, ha, old lady!" he laughed, as he parried a vicious thrust. "You must rise up early in the

morning to meet Dane Darringer with the knife. There, that will do, I think I have you."

By a dextrous wrench he had twisted the blade from her hands, and then holding his own between his teeth he flung himself at her.

Before she knew his object he had caught her by the shoulders, swayed her to this side and that, and then flung her heavily to the ground.

As far as possible Dane Darringer finished his work as he went along. With quick fingers he knotted her wrists together. The breath seemed to be fairly knocked out of her body; but he did not trust to that. She might come to her senses very suddenly, and make wild work while he was in business with his old friends, the kittens.

Left to themselves, with full maws, and the panthers would have been harmless enough, but once having joined issue with Red Bear, they were more dangerous than their master and mistress.

Yet it seemed like a sin to slay the brutes. If Darringer had not seen how hard pressed his friend, the Indian, was, he might have hesitated.

But Red Bear was already bleeding from half a dozen gashes made by the sharp claws that reached so venomously after his life, and even as Darringer sprung toward them, one, breaking the hold of the Indian with a wild scream, buried its teeth in his shoulder. The teeth seemed almost meeting for an instant; and then Dane Darringer's heavy blade came crashing down upon the spine, just behind the shoulders.

Darringer struck very hard and very true, but he scarcely varied a hair's breadth from the spot where he aimed to plant his knife. The one blow was enough.

Then there was a wild flurry in which two men and a tiger were mixed in inextricable confusion. There were cries, groans from the beast that were almost human, and after a little the three fell apart and lay mute and motionless.

After a little Dane Darringer spoke feebly.

"Young ladies, this thing may make no end of embarrassment. I am truly thankful for your sympathy, but the fact is I'm not dead."

He was quiet in his way, as ever; and it did seem time for him to speak, since Edna Wheeler had his head in her lap and was crying over him like a mother who had lost her first born, while Gertie stood by white and shivering.

A glad exclamation rose to Edna's lips; and at the same time Red Bear moved a little.

"Oh, I'm all right," continued Darringer, "and I'd like nothing better than to rest thus from my labors, but the fact is there is still danger in the air, and it seems to me somebody in the distance is burning powder at a fearful rate. Overhaul the Indian a little, and see how badly he's hurt. Touch him lightly. If he comes to he will think he's in paradise, and will take off his hat to the angels."

"Red Bear all hunky dunky," interposed the Sioux. "Him some leetle chaw-chaw; but him good as four dead men. Have only leetle drink fire water, feel like morning star."

Fire water was not to be had; but Gertie gave them each to drink a no less potent fluid, and then looked carefully at Red Bear's wounds.

They might have killed some men, but he made light of them.

"Tie handkerchum 'round um shoulder an' let um hurt. Time we pull out fur Eden City."

"Right you are, Red Bear," said Darringer struggling to his feet. "We'll just leave these two tiger cats trussed up here, where they are out of harm's way, and to-morrow we can send for them and turn them loose. To-night I must be in Eden City. There's business there. I feel it in my bones."

"Take me with you. Perhaps your foes are my foes. I sometimes think I may be all wrong. If I could see them all face to face it might clear my brain. Why should you leave Johanna here to die? She is powerless now?"

"I don't care to trust you any more than I would have done your tigers; but it goes against the grain to be harsh with a woman. I don't know of anything you could swear on so I'll have to take your word for it. You and this son of yours give us your word to try no tricks with us and you may go along and welcome. There's something about the Wheelers that you may help to clear up. Give us your promise, both of you, and I'll cut you loose."

Johanna was in a strangely submissive mood. She may have had a glimmering of insight that altered her feelings, or she may have been thoroughly cowed. Ephraim was in a reasonable mood, also; though Gertie's ascendancy had returned now that his physical power over her had ceased. They gave the pledge, and the strangely assorted party left the spot.

#### CHAPTER XXXV.

##### GOUGER GOES TO GET EVEN.

As was usual at that time in the evening the greater part of the inhabitants of the camp had gathered together at the House of Hazard, or somewhere near it, and all of them had their belts on.

Yet very little chance of successful resistance would there have been if they had not had warning of what was coming.

The man who gave that warning was a stranger to a majority of those present, though no one seemed inclined to doubt his word. Mr. Devlin, who recognized him sure enough, turned sharply toward him as he let down softly the hammer of his revolver.

"No tricks, now, Gouger. You and Huckleberry are not getting up a circus on your own hook."

Gouger pointed toward the outside, when, at that moment, an Apache yell went up.

"Does that sound like er trick. Not much. This hyar's solid fightin', an' it's just where Huckleberry an' me's ter hum. But I reckon we'd better go with ther crowd."

The good people of Eden City had considered before this the possibility of such a catastrophe, and now, short as was the notice, they were not caught napping.

Colonel Hard Up, as the one whom all would recognize, assumed command.

At a few hasty words the three or four dead and badly wounded were hastily caught up, and a rapid retreat was made through a slit that was in the canvas side of the rear of the House of Hazard.

Right above them, on the hill, and commanding the valley on either side, was a little fortification that had been thrown up as a place of retreat.

Though these men of Eden City could not stand a protracted siege, for want of supplies, yet it could not well be taken by surprise or direct assault.

As they fled to their place of refuge arrows hurtled around them, and a few bullets whistled by. It lacked but little of being a deadly surprise. How the Apaches could come in such force was a mystery; though doubtless they knew of some trail to the spot which was yet unknown to the whites.

Colonel Hard Up was the man for the moment. Reckless and daring, he was the last of all to leave; and he retired firing, covering the retreat, and assured, as he thought, that there was no one left behind. His men ran up the roadway before him, and in turn covered his retreat with a volley that forced the Apaches back to a respectful distance. Don Sylvio and his men were swallowed up and merged in the band that presented the solid face to the redskins.

For a little the firing was sharp. Then Hard Up gave his orders.

"Don't waste any bullets, boys, we've none to spare. The time may come when we'll have to make a regular charge, and we'll want them all then. Horse Indians ain't going to try this where they'll have to go it on foot, but they may sit down to starve us out. We'll take stock of them by daylight, and if there ain't more than a hundred or so we won't wait for that time but stretch 'em baldheaded where they lay. Where's Captain Bascomb?"

No answer came to the question. That worthy did not appear, and no one answered for him.

"Curses on it, he's not lost? I'm an the man that came to the House of Hazard with me. Santa Fe Sam I called him; but some of you ought to have known him."

"He went under ther table with er knife in his shoulder just when ther frolic begun. He war drawin' fur me side-pard, an' I didn't hev time ter flip her straighter, er I'd 'a' pinned him up ter dry, with ther blade plumb through his heart."

Peaceable Pete spoke apologetically and with an air of calm regret; he did not often miss his mark.

His regrets, however, did not seem to be appreciated. Colonel Hard Up turned toward him with a deadly scowl on his face; though it was hidden by the darkness there was no mistaking the ring in his voice.

"It's no time to fight the thing out now; but when we're clear of the woods there will be a little frolic with a rope, and you'll be at the end of it. Where is Frisco Frank?"

"You'll find him alongside of the saintly Bascomb," responded Pete, in the same even tone. "They war two bad men, an' I laid 'em out ter dry, but I didn't throw ter keep."

While they spoke a glare arose below.

The Apaches had fired the House of Hazard, and were yelling around the flames.

Then there came several pistol-shots, short and sharp, from the burning building.

"By ther holy jingo, Bascomb's thar, alive, an' at wor'!"

Tom Gouger was the only one who understood the combat that seemed to be going on, and his exclamation was one of such unfeigned happiness that Devlin, who had come with the crowd, looked at him in surprise. He had hardly expected Gouger to so forget and forgive, though it might be that it was only a temporary admiration for his old-time chief. Yet he knew, once more, that he could not count on the man who rejoiced in the self-given name of the Death Shot of Shasta.

But Gouger did not stop at recognition. He had not always showed the best of courage in the journey through the desert; but he had plenty of it now. While the rest looked downward in uncertainty, he turned to his partner:

"Are yer thar, Huckleberry?"

"You bet!"

"Then foller me. Thar's no condemned 'Pash kin lift his ha'r while Tom Gouger's top side o' ther sod."

"Foller she are!"

Then the two men sprung over the barricade, before any one there had divined their intention.

"Stop, you fools!" yelled Colonel Hard Up; but before the colonel had his words out they had vanished in the darkness.

It might not be hard to approach within a hundred yards of the House of Hazard without discovery; but then the two would have to cross the broad band of light through which the yelling Apaches circled around the blazing building.

Yet right through this glare they charged; and as they leaped into view there came a chorus of yells from the upper valleys, and the sound of flying feet.

There was a diversion they never could have dreamed of.

#### CHAPTER XXXVI.

##### SAVED FOR LOVE.

So intent were the men above in watching the progress of Gouger and his pard that they noticed nothing of what was going on further away.

If the two men had been better known it is more than likely that a rush would have been made to aid them; but as it was the men of Eden City shrugged their shoulders. And then, though he would scarcely care to whisper it, Colonel Hard Up felt as though he could be resigned to the loss of his unworthy ally without the shedding of many tears.

But what was the diversion?

When Dane Darringer had regained his horse, that he had left hidden in the chaparral the mounted party followed the lead of Red Bear, who, still on foot, seemed never to tire.

Emerging from the chaparral, they skirted along its edge for some little distance, and finally had almost reached the trail that led up the gulch to Eden City when Red Bear suddenly and silently wheeled, and pointed over the plain.

"Apache," he said. "Time ter git up heap quick an' trable."

"By heavens! you're right!" exclaimed Dane Darringer, after one hasty glance. "Apache they are, and not so far off as they look. No friends of ours, they; and I'll stake high they are bound for a raid on Eden City. There is no time to waste if we want to get there first. Lead out, Red Bear. We won't desert you; but put your best foot first."

"Trouble up gulch, too," said the Indian, stolidly. His sharp ears had caught the sound of a tumult in the distance.



"Ah, likely as not our friends are at work, and we must be there to help them. We cannot stay here. Forward!"

At an easy lope Red Bear led the way, the rest following.

As they turned up the trail along which Devlin and the rest had made their way their forms were dimly lined against the sky, and the sounds of distant yells came to their ears, telling that they had been seen.

Then the race began.

"Take it coolly," urged Darringer. "A stern chase is a long one, and we can beat them in."

Up the gulch Red Bear bounded, at a rate that showed he had saved up a reserve of speed.

After him came Gertie and the rest.

Away in the rear, but closing up fast, were the Apaches.

Johanna and her son might have dropped behind, since there was little danger that they would willingly harm him, and she was a known medicine woman among the wanderers of the desert; but they held grimly on.

Then, just as they burst over the brow of the elevation and turned down the larger gulch they saw the whole scene below and before them.

The same from the half dozen shanties that lay near to the burning House of Hazard shot upward. They saw the little fortification perched upon the wall of the canyon, and the Apaches circling around below.

They must charge right through the ranks of the latter if they would reach those who might be their friends. Desperate though that attempt might seem it was better than to await the attack of those in their rear, and now so very close.

Without hesitation they plunged on downward, at the very moment that Gouger and his pard threw themselves into the burning building in search of Captain Bascomb.

It is coming had not been unnoticed, and a yell went up while a score of warriors dashed out to meet them.

Then Dane Darringer threw his rein upon his mustang's neck, holding him still more tightly with his knees, while with either hand he threw up a revolver. Red Bear's hands were up also, and the two girls, with recovered weapons, joined in the volley.

It was done in the twinkling of an eye. Through the front ranks of the Apaches they crashed, leaving behind them more than one brave who would never try the war-path again.

From the little fort above there rose a cheer. The men there saw them now, though too late to aid. Just as two men rushed out from the almost consumed House of Hazard—for that unfortunate place went almost like a flash—and went staggering up the steep pathway, Dane Darringer caught Edna from her falling horse, fired half a dozen rapid shots that cleared the road before him, and darted under the cover of the fort a few yards behind Huckleberry, who was staggering along with a motionless form on his shoulder, almost a duplicate of the one that Tom Gouger bore.

Down from the mustang the two sprang.

"Hurry—up the path—above you will be safe!" exclaimed Darringer. "I must look after Gertie and Red Bear."

The pace had told on the Sioux, who was more enfeebled from his wounds than he had fancied. In the last rush he lagged a little, fell, rolled over and over, and then, as three or four of the Apaches threw themselves upon him, he struck out fiercely with his knife. He had enough to do to take care of himself, without caring for Gertie.

She had met with the same mischance as Edna—an arrow, driven feather home, had suddenly dropped her horse. As there was no sustaining arm to receive her, she was flung with a crash to the ground just at the feet of Spotted Feather.

He gave a wild cry of delight and stretched out his arms toward the girl, who lay motionless. In an instant more he would have had her.

Up to his knee Ephraim had taken no part in the fight. He had simply ridden with the rest, and he and his horse had passed unharmed through the gantlet.

Now, with a shrill cry, he sprang down, and at Spotted Feather. His ungainly form bent forward with a swinging blow, and the chief went down. Then he gathered Gertie in his arms and broke away.

No grasp could stay him, no blow bring him to halt. With almost superhuman strength he bounded up the roadway toward the men, who greeted him with a cheer. The men of Eden City were taking a hand in this fight now, and fired volley after volley at the Apaches, who, on foot, would have dashed madly up to the assault.

Over the parapet he dashed, stood tottering for a moment, while looking downward at the girl who lay in his arms.

Then he staggered, his grasp relaxed, and as, with a glad cry, Mr. Devlin sprang to relieve him of his burden, he toppled and fell headlong to the ground, while from his back there rose the feathered end of an arrow that had pierced him almost through and through, before he had reached the foot wall of the canyon below.

"That's three over kind, Huckleberry," chuckled Tom Gouger, who stood near, watching over a man who lay groaning on the ground.

"He kin save fur love; but we done the noble fur cheer, ding-blasted hate."

#### CHAPTER XXXVII.

##### JOHANNA DROPS THE CURTAIN.

MORNING dawned on what seemed to be the ruins of Eden City, and found the camp still in disorder; but in no such desperate straits as it had been the night before. At his belt Red Bear carried the scalp of Spotted Feather, and along the smoldering line of the "town" not a living Apache was to be seen. Dismayed by the fall of their leader, and the hot reception they met with on making one fierce charge against the fort, they had disappeared as silently as they had come. They knew the way across the apparently trackless deserts, and there was no danger that they would be swallowed up and lost in the winding trails by which alone the spot could be approached.

After all, Eden City was not badly harmed.

Yet there were two or three badly wounded, with whom this story has more particularly to do; and

it was only when daylight came that it was revealed just who they were. Up to that time every one was too anxiously engaged in watching for the foe to take more than cursory care of the sufferers.

But when the eastern sun came streaming into the canyon the two girls stood there, sick at heart, yet full of interest, while around were grouped Colonel Hard Up, Mr. Devlin, Dane Darringer, Peaceable Pete, Tom Gouger and several others.

By herself, a little to one side, stood Johanna, the strange woman of the desert. She looked dazed and miserable—the death of Ephraim had unsettled all her nerves—and she listened with a strangely unconscious air. She would not have been there had not Captain Bascomb asked for her presence.

"A short horse is soon curried," began the captain, "and as I know for sure that I'm going over the range, I thought I might as well straighten up a few little points that might be troublesome to unravel after I had handed in my checks. My dear—" and his eyes rested upon Edna—"come to my arms. I am your long-lost uncle."

Edna did not move.

"It is the truth I am telling. We were not a very moral and religious family, we three boys; but I was considerably the worst of the set. They used to call me Howard Wheeler in my salad days, but I dropped that handle long ago—in fact, when I first came to the West.

"John and Hector came also; but they managed to steer clear of such scrapes as I got into, and so, as their shoulders were broad, I tried my best to get them under some of my burdens. I was willing to carry their gold—and they had the better luck from the very go-off—if they would only shoulder some of my crime.

"I had some little trouble with one William Prescott and his family. I had the pleasure of killing the old gentleman, and as for his wife—her first name was Johanna, and you've mostly had the pleasure of her acquaintance—after the difficulty alluded to she hated me as badly as the worst, but unfortunately she had me confounded with my elder brothers—more especially your father, my darling."

Edna gave a shudder as she heard his words. She thought of the poisoned spring, and could hardly believe that this man could be of kin to her.

"Well, Hector disappeared, and Brother John came hunting for him. I might have told him that he had gone on a wild goose chase into Mexico; but I would have had to reveal myself, and the identity of Hector's daughter, so I kept very dark.

"I did suggest, however, to Johanna, that his name was Wheeler. She knew me as Bascomb, and never suspected the relationship. She was crazy, anyhow.

"As a result she pounced upon Brother John during one of his expeditions—looking for gold and Hector—and had him triced up safe enough in her cave.

"I needn't explain in regard to a little stock company I had formed; but in course of time a dear nephew came from the East, searching for his father, and it presented the chance of the season; for, with him out of the way, there would be nothing between me and the Wheeler fortune—which is larger than you think for—but a girl. He was shrewder than I thought for, but I had reason to believe that he was provided for; and then along comes the girl herself, with her maternal uncle in chase. Philip Ashley was as big a scoundrel as any of us, but he wanted some one to do his dirty work, while he went on to Eden City, of which John Wheeler was, by the way, the actual discoverer."

"But Philip Ashley—what of him?"

"He lies yonder. He got here in disguise, but I knew him on sight, and I suppose he knew me. Anyhow, Frisco Frank was ready to fight at the drop of a chip, and I was not loth to accommodate him. There's one thing I would like to know. I've a suspicion—of course it can't be true, but I sometimes think that Peaceable Pete is—"

"Your own brother, Hector. Villain! I see it all now. My child that you stole from me in infancy, lived and wasted all her young life. Oh, if I had only known! Yet I suspected you. I was slow to war against my own brother, and yet I was on your trail."

"Oh, yes, quite a family tea-party. Pity it is that it must soon be broken up," sneered Bascomb.

"Your knife might have gone straighter, and saved trouble. That was only a flea-bite. It was the infernal Ashley's bullet that did for me. The rascal had nerve enough to want me out of his way when he was dying himself. Never mind, I've done some good, eased my mind, and could die in peace if I knew what had become of that sinless nephew of mine."

"He is here," said a deep voice, and the young man known as Don Sylvio stepped forward. "I have waited—"

He threw off his sombrero and smoothed back his hair. At the gesture Edna threw herself into his arms.

"You, at least," she cried, "are safe."

"Yes," exclaimed Darringer, "but I wouldn't have given three bits for your life a month ago if we had met. I had sworn to shoot you on sight. One of the murdered men at Poker Flat was a brother of mine. I can blame that on that bound there. He has escaped me—perhaps so much the better. I would not have any of the Wheeler blood on my hands."

"But he has not 'scaped me," came in Gouger's deep tones. "When he was goin' ter kiver his trail, an' wanted a body-guard ter see him through ther rifle, me an' Huckleberry war his pards. He went back on us though, an' p'isoned ther water ter let us all in outen ther damp. I'm court, jedge an' jury. an' I've tried him an' foun' him guilty. Alive er dead, he's got ter swing. Me an' Huckleberry brung him out at ther risk ov bullets."

"You bet," chorused Huckleberry.

The two were scarcely noticed. The first stirring effect of the revelations was over, and the reunited relatives were in more or less happy conference together.

"You couldn't count me in the Wheeler family," remarked Mr. Devlin, edging up. "I came from pure cussedness; but nevertheless I'm here."

Gertie held out her hand with a smile.

In spite of the inconsistencies of the trail, it was not hard to guess what Mr. Devlin might one day say, and what Gertie of the Gulch would answer.

As for Edna—between her brother and Dane Darringer she almost forgot the uncertainty of her father's fate.

As they conversed together, almost in whispers, they were startled by a cry from Gouger.

"Satan let loose!" he exclaimed. "She's gone an' done it!"

"You bet," echoed Huckleberry.

Before them lay the corpse of the man who for years had been known as Howard Bascomb, and in his breast, right above his heart, was the knife that Johanna had left there. She had, at last, a tithe of her revenge though she anticipated his taking off only by an hour or so. After that she never spoke again.

Eden City! After all there was not much to say of it. Marvelous was the wealth that lay in the sands beyond it; but of what good to these men, since there was no water with which to work it. The respective bands of Captain Sylvio and Colonel Hard Up had skimmed out the available spots and the camp, flourishing as it might have been if the outside world could have gotten to it, was destined soon to be broken up.

Yet, certainly, of the little band that had wound its sinuous way across the desert to reach that camp, there were some, at least, who were more than satisfied with the results of their journey.

There was Jim Stoner, for instance. He had wonderful stories of that *terra incognita* to tell to his outsiders. He received fair wages, and if he brought back no other wealth he was sufficiently grateful at escaping the dangers of the road not to grumble. After all he would not have gone, save for Gertie's sake.

Red Bear, who had been the friend of Edna's brother, because he at one time had befriended him, cared little if he came back as poor as he went. He would not have known what to do with wealth, and as Eden City dropped away behind them he expressed his satisfaction at his last look by the familiar words:

"Hunky dunky."

Of "Pocket Jimmy" Edna never heard again. Whether he came after she had left, or whether he had been conquered by thirst or the Apaches in the desert, were questions she did not care to solve. Her earnest prayer was that she might never again meet him or any of the gang who had at one time made their headquarters at the Rooster's Ranch.

If Mr. Devlin did not win the wonderful wealth—which he never expected—he at least won Gertie of the Gulch, whose face he had seen and yearned for more than once before he started on the long trail, and Dane Darringer will never again in life wander far away from the side of the younger of the two girl pards. For Edna the total disappearance of John Wheeler was the only sorrow, and though Devlin and Dane Darringer looked long for him no trace of him ever was found.

THE END.

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